

◀ BACK TO THE ARCHIVE

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May 19-June 8, 2022 share 9

****Trigger Warning****
 This article discusses suicide which some people might find disturbing. If you or someone you know is suicidal, please contact your physician, go to your local ER, or call your local suicide prevention hotline.

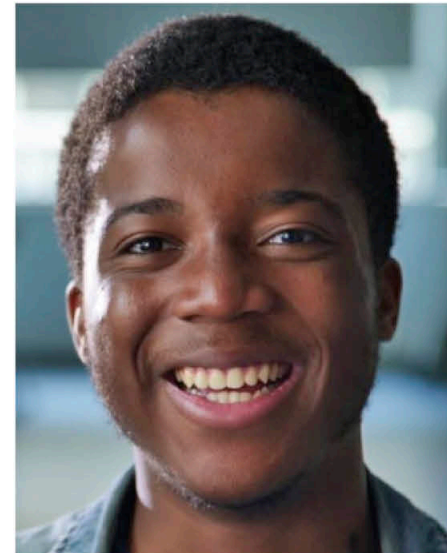
The Change He Wants to See

CHINEMEREM CHIGBO is the change he wants to see. The 19-year-old who is studying Computer Engineering at the University of Waterloo, was able to transform the grief of his friend's death into a community of young men who were ready to have difficult conversations about mental health.

After a friend committed suicide when he was 15, Chigbo decided to see a therapist and soon realized that his peers may benefit from a space where they can openly express themselves and share their feelings. Thus, The Heads-Up Guys Club was born.

A few years later, after graduating from high school, Chigbo's exemplary skills and proactivity were recognized with a 2020 TD Scholarships for Community Leadership Award. The scholarship, which assists post-secondary students with tuition and other costs associated with attending post-secondary, recognizes those who have demonstrated an outstanding commitment to community leadership.

Read our conversation with Chinemerem Chigbo as he shares his thoughts on the importance of voicing your feelings and showing your vulnerability.



CHINEMEREM CHIGBO

What compelled you to start Heads-Up Guys?

When my friend committed suicide, it hit me pretty hard. For the longest time, I didn't know how to think about it or talk about it to anyone. When I was finally ready, I spoke with a counselor and found the experience to be very fulfilling. Since I know that many guys, especially my peers, are averse to talking to authority figures about their feelings or getting help in general, I really wanted to provide a low-stress environment for anyone to be able to come in, feel free to be themselves and get whatever's on their mind out. Helping to fill a gap for my peers, was really rewarding.

What do you think is the importance of giving back, and how do you do that in your daily life?

Nobody is an island in this world. We all gain so much from everyone around us. Based on the way I was raised, I saw the impact my parents' passion for giving back to our community had on others, so it felt natural to me. At university, I'm a part of UW Blueprints, a group of students at the University of Waterloo dedicated to building technology for social good. We develop tech solutions for different charities and non-profits. I also help with food drives and do whatever I can to be of service to others.

Many conversations around mental health are the result of what's happened when something has reached a fever pitch and our response to it. What general advice would you give to young people that would help them before something reaches a boiling point?

I find that a lot of mental health tips are exactly that, they're responsive and can feel like we're trying to clean up something. I think the best approach is to be proactive and communicate with others on a frequent basis to help gauge how your mental health is doing. You don't have to be going through a crisis to talk to someone. You can share your thoughts, get advice, and learn best practices for maintaining your well-being even when you're feeling perfectly fine.

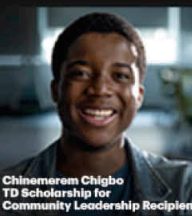
What is something practical that you do to relieve stress?

It's not always easy, but lately I've been practicing mindfulness. Just stopping, especially before going to bed, and taking some deep breaths and thinking about my thoughts. Another thing I do if I'm feeling overwhelmed is I write down what I'm thinking about or I say it out loud. The process of verbalizing what I'm feeling helps me get a tighter grip on my emotions and my thoughts.

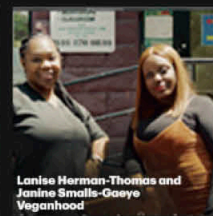
What has been the biggest lesson you've learned or insight that you've gained since starting Heads-Up Guys?

Just how much people care. I am amazed by how people are willing to listen and genuinely care about you. That's such a beautiful thing – the fact that we're willing to listen to one another, show sympathy when someone is expressing their emotions, be understanding, and also learn from each other and our ability to overcome challenges. It can be life changing.

Let's walk the walk.




Chinemerem Chigbo
TD Scholarship for
Community Leadership Recipient



Lanise Hermon-Thomas and
Janine Smalls-George
Veganhood

Black History Month and beyond.



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