

## The Quiet Work of Connection

**This reflection follows a fellowship journey where learning arrived gradually and without spectacle. Through moments of change and recalibration, it reflects on how connection—both inward and outward—quietly became central to the experience.**

My “A-ha” moment during the fellowship did not come from a single event. It came from realizing that everything I was learning—about leadership, care, and impact—was deeply rooted in connection. Connection inward, to calm and ground myself when things went out of plan. And connection outward, to the people who walked alongside me, often quietly, but consistently.

As someone who is used to planning and anticipating risks, my instinct when things began to shift was to tighten control. Timeline changes, provider burnout, health emergencies, and fluctuating participation pushed the project far from its original plan. In those moments, my first reaction was anxiety—my mind rushing to fix, reorganize, and hold everything together. What I slowly learned, however, was that control without inner grounding only creates more tension.

The first connection I had to rebuild was the one with myself. I learned to pause, regulate my emotions, and calm my body before making decisions. When plans fell apart, grounding myself allowed me to respond instead of react. This inner connection became essential: it helped me stay clear-headed, compassionate, and intentional, even when circumstances felt unstable. Over time, I realized that self-regulation was not a personal coping mechanism—it was a leadership skill.

At the same time, the fellowship reminded me how deeply sustaining external connection can be. During workshops, I felt supported not only by fellows, mentors, and facilitators, but also by people whose roles might seem invisible—like the kitchen staff who prepared meals for us every day. Their care, presence, and warmth contributed to a sense of safety and belonging that stayed with me long after the sessions ended. These moments reminded me that support often comes from many directions, not just formal roles.

That same sense of connection continued while I was running the program. Working closely with psychologists and participants created a shared emotional ecosystem—one built on trust, care, and mutual respect. The psychologists were not just service providers; they were partners who carried emotional responsibility alongside me. Participants, in turn, trusted the program enough to show up honestly, sometimes vulnerably. That trust felt like an exchange of energy—one that strengthened my belief in myself and in the work we were doing.

Through these interactions, I began to understand community in a deeper way. Community is not only about people who share the same identity. It is also about allies who stand behind the work, offering quiet support, labor, and encouragement so that things can move forward. In this fellowship, I felt held by a network of people who believed in the work—not just in my project, but in the broader movement toward dignity, care, and affirmation.

This collective energy mattered more than I initially realized. The positive energy that flowed through these connections became fuel—helping me keep going when the project felt heavy. It

made me trust myself more, not because everything was perfect, but because I was not carrying the weight alone. And through that energy, good intentions circulated into meaningful outcomes.

Over time, however, I also began to notice something deeper. The work was not only about delivering counseling sessions or meeting numerical targets. While outputs and numbers were important, they were not the heart of the project. What mattered most was the quality of care—whether each person felt safe, affirmed, and respected. Even reaching a small number of participants deeply felt more meaningful than reaching many without care.

This realization influenced how I approached documentation and visibility. Because the program was fully online, I chose not to collect personal chat documentation or private messages. This was a conscious decision rooted in community-centered values. I wanted to prioritize safety, trust, and dignity over proof or performance. For me, protecting the emotional space of participants was more important than capturing personal narratives for reporting purposes.