

# Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION<sup>Review</sup>

---

*Field Report*  
**Adventures in Healing**  
By Kathy O. Brozek

Stanford Social Innovation Review  
Winter 2024

Copyright © 2024 by Leland Stanford Jr. University  
All Rights Reserved

*Stanford Social Innovation Review*  
**[www.ssir.org](http://www.ssir.org)**  
Email: [editor@ssir.org](mailto:editor@ssir.org)

# FIELD REPORT

Profiles of innovative work

## Adventures in Healing

Chicago Adventure Therapy is helping young people and families in high-crime communities to heal by connecting with nature.

BY KATHY O. BROZEK

In 2022, and for the 11th year in a row, Chicago had the highest rate of homicides in the United States, at 18.4 per 100,000 residents. This rate is five times the homicide rate of New York City and two and a half times that of Los Angeles—the two largest cities in America. In the first seven months of 2023, the number of major crimes in Chicago outpaced 2022 numbers by 34 percent.

These dire statistics tell only one part of the story. The residents of Chicago's violence-stricken neighborhoods are living with their own harrowing experiences and have few options for learning how to cope day-to-day, much less thrive.

In 2008, licensed clinical social worker Andrea Knepper founded the nonprofit Chicago Adventure Therapy (CAT) to provide outdoor-adventure sports to heal and rebuild communities in the South and West sides of Chicago—the areas where crime is the highest. The mission was informed by Knepper's unique skill set as a social worker who also holds multiple certifications in whitewater kayaking, open canoeing, and outdoor leadership instruction.

"The majority of the youth are impacted by ... gun violence, gang activity, and hate crimes," observes Knepper, who serves as CAT's executive director. "We provide adventure therapy ... that helps the youth to heal and rewire a brain changed by trauma. CAT offers outdoor sports and clinical practices like mindfulness, while integrating the participant's emotional, physical, and cognitive responses."



Chicago Adventure Therapy founder and executive director Andrea Knepper helps a participant into her kayak in the Diversey Harbor Lagoon, Chicago, 2008.

Research from the US Department of Agriculture Forest Service and the American Psychological Association supports the premise that exposure to nature can positively affect mental health: it can help to decrease risk of depression, increase social connection, facilitate and expedite psychological recovery from stress, and lower community violence.

Yet these benefits reach Americans disproportionately. According to the Outdoor Foundation's 2021 Outdoor Participation Trends Report, the national rates of outdoor recreation among Americans are lower among people of color: 46 percent of Hispanic Americans and 38 percent of Black Americans—compared with 74 percent of white Americans—had participated in outdoor sports in 2020.

By serving the South and West sides of Chicago, which are predominantly Black and Hispanic, CAT applies a nature-based, therapeutic approach to helping youth and young adults stay healthy in mind and body and find community and friendship with each other amid the high rates of violence in their neighborhoods.

### SEEDING HOPE

Knepper started CAT because there was no program like it in Chicago. The nonprofit initially raised about \$7,000 from one in-person event, which mainly covered the costs of a handful of outings and insurance for 35 participants in its first year.

CAT operates five programs directed to different community populations. The two main programs, which comprise about 90 percent of CAT's services, focus on youth: Core programming offers outdoor activities such as kayaking, hiking, and rock climbing to young people in areas such as Lake Michigan's Jackson Harbor and the Fox River; and after-school programming provides on-site instruction at schools for outdoor education, nature reflections, and outdoor skill-building activities, as well as occasional off-site adventure trips.

These two primary programs operate through collaborations with other nonprofit organizations that serve specific demographic groups. CAT and its partners have similar objectives as they focus on providing youth on the South and West sides with safe, healthy options for how to spend their

time. The partner nonprofits pay CAT on a sliding scale that is determined by their available resources, and they provide transportation for their supervisory staff and participants to the activities.

Project Impact 180, a community-based leadership and mentoring program for youth living in high-risk communities, has been a CAT after-school program partner since 2020. Its founder and executive director, Elaine Marthel, was drawn to CAT's work because mentors from local nonprofits helped her while she was growing up on the West Side.

"We are planting a seed for their love of nature," Marthel says of the partnership's benefits for South and West Side youth. "Watching our youth find solace in a kayak as they connect with the tranquility of nature is a powerful reminder. In our turbulent neighborhoods, where gunshots are a grim backdrop and dodging bullets becomes a skill, these moments on the water offer a lifeline to hope and healing."

CAT offers three additional programs for a wide range of residents: Family adventures are free activities for families in

To better represent and serve communities of color on Chicago's West and South sides, CAT prioritizes hiring racially marginalized people. Four of its eight-person staff members were volunteers at the time of hire. When paid positions are available, volunteers are considered for part-time and full-time staff roles.

CAT's board chair, Simon Shapiro, who is Black, became an active CAT participant as a young adult while living in a Chicago homeless shelter. Staff from CAT and Chicago-based social-services organization The Night Ministry met Shapiro six years ago during shelter visits.

"I had little self-confidence at that point in my life," Shapiro says. "Going on a five-day camping trip with CAT restored a lot of the confidence that I'd lost when I was on the street."

Approximately eight months after initially meeting CAT and Night Ministry staff, Shapiro found stable housing. Within a year, Shapiro was selected to be a volunteer because he demonstrated leadership potential. Now, at the age of 26, Shapiro is close to completing a college degree and is

and respect among participant groups in the CAT community.

"We let relationships form and allow the process of sharing to happen naturally," says CAT associate executive director Zorbari Nwidor. "We create a safe space and let the participant who faced trauma talk, or not talk, about it. We meet folks where they are at in that moment [and] we let them know that there are people who care about them."

CAT and its partners call this safe space a "container" for the participants to share whatever traumas they may have experienced—and it is not unusual for youth to show up for an activity during their recovery from gun violence. The container is free from the expectation that participants divulge their trauma.

Nwidor shared the story of a 16-year-old who was shot a week prior to participating in a canoeing program: "Since he still had a bullet lodged within his body, we put him in the middle of a canoe so he wouldn't have to actually paddle, but he could still find peace on the water."

The clinical practice of mindfulness is at the core of CAT's adventure therapy and is incorporated into its programs. "Most of our interventions revolve around the trauma that a participant experienced," Knepper explains. "When our young people learn a kayak rescue or get stuck at the crux of a climb, they have to pause because fight-or-flight responses are not options. This pause helps access the cerebral cortex, not going to immediate action but rather rewiring a brain changed by chronic trauma."

From serving 35 people in 2008 to more than 1,200 in 2022, CAT has demonstrated that it plays a crucial role in the communities it serves—with internal data indicating that about 80 percent of participants have attended four or more outings. A defining aspect of CAT's programming is focused on building resiliency: The programs are structured to help participants to develop perseverance, strength, and courage, which will serve them well into the future. •

"We meet folks where they are in that moment [and] we let them know that there are people who care about them."

marginalized communities who have lost a member to gun violence; community festivals are neighborhood-outreach efforts where CAT staff and volunteers bring outdoor gear to parks, block parties, and other gatherings to perform equipment demonstrations; and adventure communities is a program that offers outdoor activities such as kayaking for CAT alumni (individuals who already engaged with CAT but may no longer be eligible for core and family programs) from marginalized groups like the LGBTQ+ and refugee communities.

CAT's programs are free for all participants. The nonprofit covers its expenses with funding mostly from individual donors as well as foundations and governmental agencies. CAT is now seeking unrestricted funds for creating new infrastructure and internal processes to expand its operations and serve more residents.

working full-time in financial services.

Today, he uses the leadership skills he cultivated at CAT to develop those skills in other CAT participants. "It's easier for participants to take the first step when they are with people from their own community," he explains. "We'll often be the only group with Black and Hispanic paddlers or climbers, offering the spirit of encouragement for not only outdoor sports, but in facing life challenges—including community violence—overall."

#### **THERAPEUTIC COMMUNITIES**

**The therapeutic elements** of CAT's programs emerge organically over time and are the positive effects of the consistent care and reliability of CAT's staff and its partners. Healing cannot be dictated but occurs only when participants feel trust

KATHY O. BROZEK is a consultant to mission-driven organizations and the author of *The Transformation of American Agriculture*. Her work has appeared in *The Guardian*, *Community Development Investment Review*, and *GreenBiz.com*.