

# Building a Kinder and Braver World

An Interview with Maya Smith, Executive Director, Born This Way Foundation

**EDITORS' NOTE** *In her role as the first Executive Director of Born This Way Foundation, Maya Smith engages a diverse array of partners across sectors to conduct innovative research, builds authentic youth-focused programming and leads effective campaigns that foster kindness and advance the conversation around mental health. With nearly 20 years of experience in the youth empowerment, civic engagement and community development fields, Smith previously served as the Chief Executive Officer and Chief Operating Officer of Mobilize.org and began her career as East Coast Coordinator for Rock the Vote. In addition to her work with Born This Way Foundation, she is a proud member of the Presidential Leadership Scholars Class of 2022 and serves on the Bullying Prevention Advisory Committee (BPAC) for the Mental Health Services Oversight and Accountability Commission (MHSOAC). Smith is a graduate of Rutgers University.*



Maya Smith

## Will you provide an overview of the work of Born This Way Foundation and its initiatives?

Born This Way Foundation builds youth-focused programs and engaging campaigns that increase access to resources, drive action and build community. The Foundation's work also focuses on research and strategic, cross-sectoral partnerships that inform and bolster these high-impact programs and campaigns.

Born This Way Foundation's Channel Kindness ([channelkindness.org](https://channelkindness.org)) is a digital platform and safe space for young people to tell their stories of kindness, resilience and community, as well as pledge to take action immediately by supporting organizations, advocating for communities, writing letters, caring for their own mental health and more. Campaigns like #BeKind21 and #PleaseStayPledge engage individuals and organizations around the world in activities to support the well-being of their own minds and build communities that prioritize mental health.

Born This Way Foundation hosts #BeKind21 annually, a global movement which calls on participants to practice an act of kindness each day from September 1 to September 21, 2021 was the largest #BeKind21 campaign to date, with more than 6.8 million participants and over 142 million pledged acts of kindness. Born This Way Foundation shared a variety of materials throughout the month including evidence-based self-care tips, #BeKind21 social post templates to invite others to join, mental health resources, help lines and chat services, a custom #BeKind21 calendar for participants to follow and practice intentional acts of kindness each day, and more.

In the height of the pandemic, we also partnered with Find Your Anchor, a grassroots suicide prevention resource, to create the Please Stay campaign, which is a resource and pledge encouraging anyone who visits the website to find resources for support. Moreover, Born This Way Foundation works with leading experts and youth themselves to conduct and amplify quality research. The Kindness Is Action report, for example, which we released last spring,

**FOUNDATION BRIEF** *Born This Way Foundation ([bornthisway.foundation](https://bornthisway.foundation)), co-founded and led by Lady Gaga and her mother, Cynthia Germanotta, supports the mental health of young people and works with them to build a kinder and braver world.*

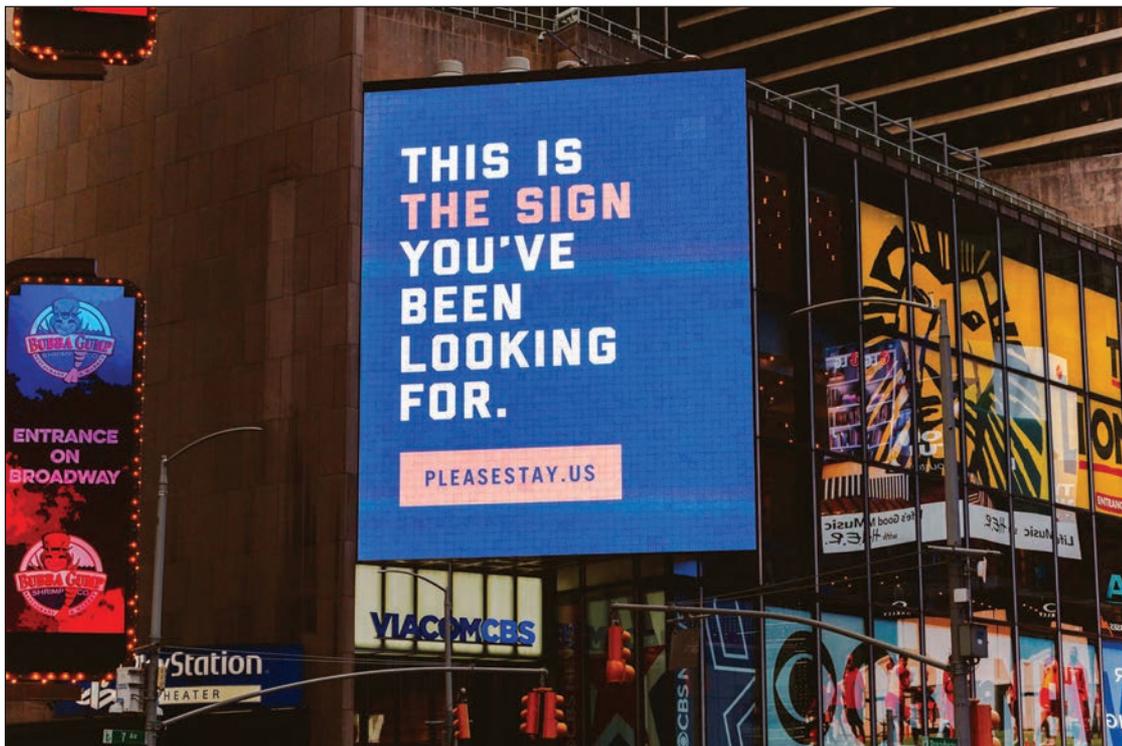
## Will you highlight the history of Born This Way Foundation and how you define its mission?

Born This Way Foundation was founded in 2012 by Lady Gaga and her mother, Cynthia Germanotta, and works to promote the mental health and wellness of youth by making kindness cool, validating the emotions of young people and eliminating the stigma surrounding mental health. The Foundation focuses on modeling healthy conversations about mental health, connecting young people with resources and services – online and offline – and building communities that understand, prioritize, and foster good mental health.

This year, Born This Way Foundation is celebrating its 10th Anniversary. Since its inception, Born This Way Foundation has worked in support of and with young people to build a kinder and braver world.



Left to Right - Maya Smith, Lady Gaga, Cynthia Germanotta



Billboard in Times Square featuring Please Stay messaging

collected data from thousands of youth and parents to better understand the intersection of kindness and mental health and the factors that affect and support young people's mental health.

At the heart of our work though, truly is youth voices. We recruited 29 youth from across the globe to advise on the Foundation's initiatives to ensure the Foundation is responsive to the needs of youth everywhere. Whether it's messaging or how we discuss something on our own platforms, their voices inform and enhance our work.

This spring, we're excited to launch many new initiatives that build upon our legacy that we've created and bring awareness and action to even more youth and people in general. In March, we released an all-new, first-of-its-kind mental health resource that teaches young people how to identify if their peers are struggling with mental health: the Be There Certificate.

Created in partnership with Jack.org, with major funding provided by Under Armour, the certificate will be the first-ever certificate to provide the tools and the knowledge to support someone struggling with their mental health. Just as Google Analytics or premier U.S. universities launched online training for further education, Born This Way Foundation is now doing the same for mental health. The Be There Certificate is available in English, French and Spanish, offering universal best practices in supporting youth mental health. Realistic scenarios enable learners to dive deeper into the complexities of what they learned online to real-life situations and will train young people to safely support their peers struggling with mental health.

This is just one of the many important milestones we're focusing on and we look forward to unveiling more groundbreaking programming throughout the year.

**What was the vision for creating the storytelling platform, Channel Kindness, and how has this platform evolved?**

ChannelKindness.org, our online storytelling platform, was created to elevate youth voices and inspire readers. It's a safe space where individuals, organizations, and educators can read and share their stories of resilience, kindness, and bravery to both foster a sense of community and to inspire others across the globe. It has evolved to emphasize the idea of kindness as action, by providing action steps



Born This Way Foundation and Jack.org partnered to create the Be There Certificate (BeThereCertificate.org), a first-of-its-kind mental health resource

to take at the end of each story. For example, you could sign a pledge, share your own story, send a kind letter, or sign up for Born This Way Foundation's annual kindness campaign #BeKind21. Channel Kindness stories and the resulting action inspires me, and the entire team at Born This Way Foundation, to push forward on our mission to build a kinder, braver world.

We often call ourselves and this platform the "Kindest corner of the internet!"

**Born This Way Foundation places a major emphasis on research. Will you discuss the importance of research in making sure that Born This Way Foundation's programming is grounded in the latest scientific evidence?**

The goal of our research is to collect, learn from and amplify lived experiences on the issues that guide our work every day. We believe research is a necessary tool to help solve the problems facing our communities and build a kinder, braver world. Collecting and documenting youth experiences of mental health and the factors that impact their well-being allows us to effectively leverage our resources and ensure all of our programming is grounded in the latest scientific evidence so we can appropriately meet the needs of youth everywhere.

In 2021, Born This Way Foundation worked with The Harris Poll to survey over 2,000 young people ages 13 to 24 in the United States to explore how kindness affects mental health, including how young people define kindness, the impact of kindness on mental wellness and how young people are using kindness to cope with overlapping and ongoing crises. Released during Mental Health Awareness Month, the results revealed an undeniable link to how kindness helps young people feel safe, confident and less alone. The survey served as a

precursor to #BeKind21, our largest annual campaign, by showcasing why kindness is so important for our resilience, mental health and communities, and offers insight into how we can support others and build a kinder, braver world. We also released findings on a two-year comparison study in Las Vegas that looks at why mental health resource accessibility is key, in addition to how college students are open to peer help.

Later this spring, we'll be revealing findings about research on the importance of kindness in the workplace and its impact on employee mental health in partnership with Indeed, in addition to educators' mental health with our partner, DonorsChoose.

**How did Born This Way Foundation adapt the way it works to address the challenges caused by the global pandemic?**

As communities across the world faced the trauma of a pandemic and a host of global challenges, Born This Way Foundation worked to understand and meet people where they are. In the Kindness is Action survey, a majority (73 percent) of young people say receiving kindness improves their mental wellness, but experiencing kindness varies across race, ethnicities, gender, sexual orientation and financial security. This finding has helped guide the Foundation's programmatic approach.

The 2021 #BeKind21 campaign was uniquely designed to be responsive to today's movements, to showcase that kindness is not an empty gesture; rather, kindness is a verb. To be kind is to speak up. To be kind is to prioritize your mental wellness. To be kind is to advocate for a world that values, validates and respects all people.

Fortunately, the Kindness is Action survey found that since the start of the pandemic, 70 percent of young people report feeling more

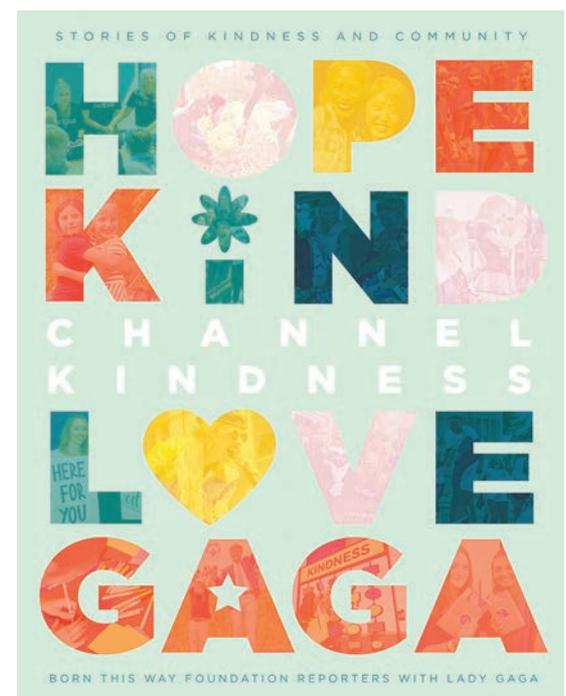
comfortable seeking resources to improve their mental wellness and over two-thirds report a greater willingness among family (68 percent) and friends (67 percent) to talk about mental wellness. Born This Way Foundation has worked tirelessly to provide these resources and meet young people where they are online and provide actionable resources and support.

In a particularly challenging year, the Foundation's initiatives and campaigns worked in tandem to advance its mission toward building a kinder, braver world. The pandemic has affected nearly every sector of our professional and personal lives, and it's important that we look more closely at how our mental health contributes to our overall wellness.

**Will you discuss Lady Gaga's passion and commitment for the work of Born This Way Foundation and how deeply engaged she is in its efforts?**

The transformative impact that kindness has had on our co-founder, Lady Gaga, or LG as I call her, is what propelled Born This Way Foundation into the world almost a decade ago. She is a driving force in our work and is involved in everything that we do – from the strategic vision to late night texts on messaging for social media. We have many examples, including our *CHANNEL KINDNESS: Stories of Kindness and Community* book, which was a collection of stories she helped curate, which was inherently designed to fulfill or mitigate the absence of kindness felt by filling the negative space.

Additionally, late last year, we debuted a film, which she took center stage in as part of a World Kindness Day special. It was a commanding short film highlighting the personal mental health experiences of a group of young people and explored the strong relationship between kindness and mental health. Lady Gaga and mental health expert Dr. Alfie



Breland-Noble (she/her/hers) engaged in a compelling and intimate conversation with 11 incredible young people who openly talked about their mental health journeys, supporting one another, to ultimately defy the stigma.

**Did you always know you had a passion for this type of work and what makes the work so special for you?**

Yes. I haven't thought of this memory in many years, but given the crisis unfolding in Eastern Europe, I remember my first memory of the power of storytelling. My mother was a journalist in Communist Romania before immigrating to the United States a couple of years before I was born. When the Romanian Revolution was unfolding in 1989, she went back to Romania to tell the stories of her homeland for *60 Minutes*. She went to the place many people were fleeing, because stories matter and they must be heard.

Later, my mother became a psychoanalyst and her choices again shaped my passion and purpose in the world. I knew from a very early age that I wanted to build community and bear witness to stories, leveraging every platform, relationship and invitation I received in service to that mission.

**What are your priorities for Born This Way Foundation as you look to the future?**

Now and forever, kindness is at the cornerstone of everything we do, and we believe that it is the starting point of every first step toward taking care of our mental health. We believe that improving youth mental health is beyond meeting them during crises: it must include supporting their everyday lives while providing skills and resources to address mental health challenges.

That's our to do list, every day. We will continue to invest in programs, partnerships, campaigns and most importantly, young people, with the goals of increasing access to – and creation of – resources that support mental health and point to kindness as the way forward for all. ●



*Channel Kindness authors Josh Greenblatt, Perri Easley, and Josh Hollin*