

# The Leader

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## Benji Project will become independent

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StrongerTowns, a Port Townsend nonprofit that serves as an umbrella for fledgling charities, is proud to announce the Benji Project, started in 2017 and developed under StrongerTowns' auspices, has graduated to become its own independent 501(c)(3) organization.

StrongerTowns secretary and treasurer Ben Bauermeister explained his group serves as "a rural social impact incubator" by providing fiscal sponsorship to "innovative concepts that help our community and our youth thrive," just as the Benji Project seeks to support teens and families in cultivating stress management and "emotional resilience" skills.

Heather McRae-Woolf, executive director of the Benji Project, explained that it was founded by Cynthia Osterman, after she lost her 15-year-old son to suicide in 2015.

"Benji was beloved throughout the Port Townsend community," McRae-Woolf said.

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# Benji Project to become an independent non profit

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“He touched so many lives, but being a teen is tough, regardless of who you are, especially in an age of stressors ranging from social media to climate change.”

To that end, ever since the Benji Project joined StrongerTowns in 2018, it has worked with more than 1,000 youths throughout East Jefferson County, using both in-person and virtual formats to continue its work during the pandemic.

“During the school year, we offer classes in middle schools and high schools across East Jefferson County,” McRae-Woolf said. “Beginning at the end of September, we’ll be offering an after-school program at Blue Heron Middle School. We want to meet young people where they’re at.”

During the summers, the Benji Project offers Pride Camp for LGBTQ+ youth, as well as Mindfulness in Motion, which McRae-Woolf deemed a “compassionate curriculum” that’s open to all middle schoolers.

“We also offered enrichment classes for middle schoolers during the Port Townsend School District’s ‘Summer Blast,’” McRae-Woolf said.

McRae-Woolf noted the Benji Project not only strives to serve a broad spectrum of teen needs by furnishing kids with an array of tools and strategies for coping and healing, but it also partners with other local community organizations who serve similar needs, including the Port Townsend-based Olympic Pride.

McRae-Woolf and Osterman both credited StrongerTowns with enabling the Benji Project to build its own organizational structure, which has expanded to include not only eight part-time instructors who lead and assist with its programs, but also Aleah Lawrence-Pine as its operations manager, Loren Alexanian as its development manager, and McRae-Woolf as its executive director.

Martha Trolin, president of StrongerTowns, explained her group’s goal is always to nurture the success of charities such as the Benji Project, to the point where they “eventually outgrow our structure and head out on their own.”

Now Osterman, who serves as president of the board for the Benji Project, believes her own group has finally “reached a point where



Above: Mindfulness in Motion camp this summer at Fort Townsend State Park. Right: Camper Micah Katz shares a painted rock from an art activity at the Benji Project Pride Camp. Photo courtesy of Heather McRae-Woolf

we can run our operations independently, (which) is a big shift for us.”

With its recently hired new instructors, the Benji Project plans to expand its after-school and in-school programs, which Bauermeister praised for fulfilling StrongerTowns’ requirement that the nonprofits it sponsors should not only “experiment with new solutions to rural problems,” but also share the solutions they discover.

“The Benji Project is carrying out that mission, which is wonderful to see and benefits the entire community,” Bauermeister said.

For more information on the Benji Project,



visit [thebenjiproject.org](http://thebenjiproject.org).

StrongerTowns also supports the Jefferson County nonprofits of the Production Alliance,

Skillmation Mentoring, Yea Music and Community Build. For more information on StrongerTowns, visit [strongertowns.org](http://strongertowns.org).