

May 2026

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***Mahi's
Mission:***
*Turning Personal
Challenge Into
a Movement
for Teen
Wellness*

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*Photo by Jordan
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SWEDSBORO REGIONAL HIGH SCHOOL
MAIN ENTRANCE NORTH

Mahi's Mission: Turning Personal Challenge Into a Movement for Teen Wellness

BY MATTHEW RAPPA

On any given day, you might find Mahalakshmi "Mahi" Mopal moving between classrooms, planning meetings, and community spaces — her schedule full, her purpose clear. At 17, the Kingsway Regional High School senior carries a sense of direction that many spend years trying to define.

But her journey didn't begin with certainty. It began with a question: *What happens when your own health forces you to stop — and listen?*

A few years ago, Mahi faced health challenges that disrupted her daily life and pulled her away from school for months. The experience was isolating and frustrating. It also sparked curiosity. Instead of accepting limitations, Mahi began searching for answers to better understand her body, mind, and the connection between them. That moment changed everything.

"I started focusing on what I could control," Mahi says. "That shift helped me move forward."

What began as a personal effort to regain stability soon evolved into something larger: a mission to help other teens do the same.

Making Wellness Practical, Personal, and Accessible

Mahi's response to adversity wasn't to retreat — it was to build. She founded the Community Teen Wellness Program, a peer-led initiative that teaches adolescents practical and accessible approaches to health. Rooted in the six pillars of lifestyle medicine — nutrition, physical activity, sleep, stress management, social connection, and substance avoidance — the program translates complex health concepts into real-life habits teens can understand and apply.

Through workshops, activities, and discussions, Mahi fosters an environment that encourages participants to engage. They journal, cook, move, reflect, and, most importantly, begin to see the connection between their daily choices and how they feel.



Photo by Jordan Fiordaliso Studio

"It's about creating a space where people can show up as they are." — MAHI MOPAL



"Always choose kindness. You never know what someone is going through."

— MAHI MOPAL



Photo by Jordan Fiordaliso Studio

"I saw how powerful it was when people understood how to take care of themselves," she explains. "That's what made me want to share it."

The program has reached teens across multiple communities, with participants reporting changes in sleep habits, stress management, and overall awareness of their well-being. Mahi's work doesn't stop there.

Building Inclusive Spaces Through Movement

In addition to her teen wellness initiative, Mahi — a 200-hour certified yoga instructor, a nationally recognized training standard — launched Yoga Beyond Boundaries, an adaptive yoga program designed for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Here, the focus shifts from performance to possibility.

Each session emphasizes balance, coordination, and strength — while building confidence and connection. Participants move at their own pace, supported by modifications that make each pose accessible and manageable.

"Everyone deserves to feel included and capable," Mahi says. "It's about creating a space where people can show up as they are."

Her work has taken her into libraries, university programs, and community organizations, where she teaches children, young adults, and underserved populations. Throughout every session, she reinforces a simple yet powerful idea: wellness should be accessible to everyone.

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A Voice That Carries Beyond the Stage

While many know Mahi for her leadership and advocacy, others recognize her voice — literally. At Kingsway, she's often referred to as the "National Anthem Girl," performing at major events. Singing is another way for her to connect with others. It's expressive, personal, and deeply human. Even here, her purpose remains consistent.

"I want people to feel something," she says. "Whether it's through music or through my programs, it's about connection."

That connection extends into every part of her life — from her leadership roles in Student Council and the Biology Club to her involvement in statewide and national initiatives focused on youth health and advocacy.

Leadership That Starts with Listening

Ask Mahi what leadership means, and she won't talk about titles or recognition.

"It means creating space for others," she says. "It's about listening and helping people feel seen."

That mindset shows up in the way she leads her programs. Participants aren't passive recipients — they're contributors. They ask questions, share experiences, and shape discussions. Mahi facilitates, but she also learns alongside them.

Her approach reflects a broader shift in how younger generations view leadership — one that is less about authority and more about impact. Teens who once felt disconnected now feel more in control of their health. Small changes — such as getting more sleep, managing stress, and making healthier food choices — start to build into lasting habits.

"It's those small shifts that matter," Mahi says. "They add up."

Mahi's leadership style didn't develop in isolation. Mentors helped shape how she thinks, teaches, and leads. Dr. Beth Frates, a physician leader in lifestyle medicine and associate professor at Harvard Medical School, helped guide her work on the Community Teen Wellness Program, encourag-



ing her to take broad wellness concepts and translate them into structured, practical lessons that resonate with teens. Meanwhile, Dr. Leslie Spencer, a professor in the Department of Health and Exercise Science at Rowan University, supported Mahi as she developed Yoga Beyond Boundaries, offering guidance on creating inclusive spaces, adapting instruction for different abilities, and staying consistent through challenges.

Those experiences helped Mahi grow into a more confident leader — one who now carries those same lessons into every program she leads and every student she reaches.

The Power of Family and Perspective

Behind Mahi's drive is a strong foundation at home. She describes her family as close-knit, the kind that shows up through every high and low.

Her mother, Pavani, a physician, instills compassion and strength, teaching her to strive for progress over perfection. Her father, Praveen, a software consultant, reinforces discipline and the importance of following through on big goals.



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Her older brother, Arjuna, is a constant source of encouragement — someone she turns to for perspective, laughter, and a reminder to stay grounded. Even Dash, the family dog, plays a role, offering comfort in quiet moments and a sense of normalcy during the toughest days.

"They always taught me to focus on *why* I'm doing something," she says.

That sense of purpose took shape during some of Mahi's most challenging moments, when her family reminded her to take care of herself along the way. That support shaped how she approaches everything she builds today.

Whether she's leading a workshop or mentoring peers, that influence is clear. Her focus remains on helping others — creating spaces where people feel supported, understood, and empowered to move forward.

Recognition That Reinforces Purpose

Mahi's efforts haven't gone unnoticed. She has received honors ranging from a New Jersey Governor's Volunteerism Award to national recognition at the American College of Lifestyle Medicine conference, where her work earned top distinction among research presentations.

Woolwich Township Mayor Natalie Matthias also recognized her with a mayoral proclamation celebrating her contributions to wellness, inclusion, and youth empowerment. For Mahi, recognition serves a different purpose.

"It shows that the work is reaching people," she says. "That's what matters."

Lessons for a Generation

Mahi's story resonates because it reflects challenges many teens face — stress, uncertainty, pressure to keep up. It also offers something else: a path forward.

Her message is simple: start small, focus on what you can control, take care of your body and mind, and stay connected to others.

These habits are particularly important at a time when many young people feel overwhelmed and disconnected.

"A lot of teens don't know how to take care of themselves in a realistic way," Mahi says. "We're expected to figure it out."

Her work aims to change that.

Looking Ahead

As high school graduation approaches, Mahi stands on the edge of her next chapter. She plans to study health sciences, with a focus on adolescent and women's health, to become a child and adolescent psychiatrist — a path that connects directly to her experiences and passions.

She also intends to expand her programs, reaching new communities and building on what she has already created. "I want to keep growing what I've started," she says. "There's so much more to do."

Her vision includes integrating wellness education into schools, partnering with community organizations, and empowering other teens to lead similar initiatives. It's an ambitious goal — but one grounded in lived experience.

If there's one takeaway Mahi hopes readers carry with them, it's kindness. "Always choose kindness," she says. "You never know what someone is going through."

In a world that often moves too fast, Mahi's story invites us to slow down, pay attention, and take care of ourselves — and each other.

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