

# Community listening project coming to Birmingham



(courtesy)



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Do you have something to say?

Pretty soon, Birmingham will host volunteers who want to hear it. Sidewalk Talk, a San Francisco-based nonprofit that trains and deploys volunteer listeners will visit the Magic City on April 14 to offer a short course on skilled listening followed by a public event.

Volunteer listeners will set up in Railroad Park from 4:30 to 6:30 p.m. and invite members of the community to share their thoughts. It's all part of an effort to promote community connection and emotional health.

Traci Ruble, a licensed psychotherapist, co-founded Sidewalk Talk in 2014 with therapist Lily Sloane. At first, they wanted to reduce stigma around therapy, but the goal has evolved since then to include community building and encouraging empathy.

"My motivation began after the Sandy Hook shooting," Ruble said. "I thought, 'I cannot make sense of this.' I did not feel like being a therapist in my office was going to help me understand it."

Sidewalk Talk has held several events in California and in large cities such as Chicago and Washington, D.C. Friday's event will mark the first time Sidewalk Talk has visited Alabama, a stop scheduled as part of a [road trip](#) to bring the organization to smaller cities within the South and Midwest.

"We live in San Francisco, which has a very narrowly focused political bent," Ruble said. "You kind of meet similar types of people there who believe a lot of the same things. We wanted to do a tour through states we have never been to."

Ruble said listening to and connecting with people can have a positive impact on mental health.

"We have this data that shows human connection makes us feel better," she said.

A training session earlier in the day will equip volunteers with skills to listen actively and without judgment, Ruble said. It's open to the public and scheduled for 12 to 1:30 p.m. at the UAB campus. Some of the skills come from the field of psychotherapy, with an emphasis on hearing what people have to say instead of healing them

"The piece that's most important - I believe that compassion is something that happens between equals," Ruble said. "As a volunteer, you are just showing up as a human who has no answers."

In past events, volunteers have encountered people who needed mental health treatment, Ruble said. Volunteers can distribute information about low and no-cost resources for people who need professional treatment. Ruble recalled an incident involving a woman who appeared at an event in San Francisco days after she traveled cross-country without medication she needed to treat bipolar disorder. A volunteer steered her toward a local mental health center.

But many participants have no need for mental health treatment. Often they don't even share anything negative or sad, Ruble said.

"We're not out there as mental health workers," Ruble said. "We're not out there assuming people are broken. There are not enough therapists in the world to heal all the problems in the world. People need to be dialed into a community."

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