



VERMONT PRINCIPALS' ASSOCIATION · THE GRL INITIATIVE

Belonging Is a Mental Health Strategy.

Dr. Lauren Young



FOLLOW ME: @THEGRLINITIATIVE

Email: thegrinitiative@gmail.com

Podcast: Go Off, GRL available on Spotify

Third Space: www.vermontthirdspace.org

The GRL Initiative: www.thegrinitiative.com

COMING SOON:
(MY FIRST PUBLISHED BOOK)

Lead Anyway: The Glow-up Guide to Leadership That's Real, Not Perfect.

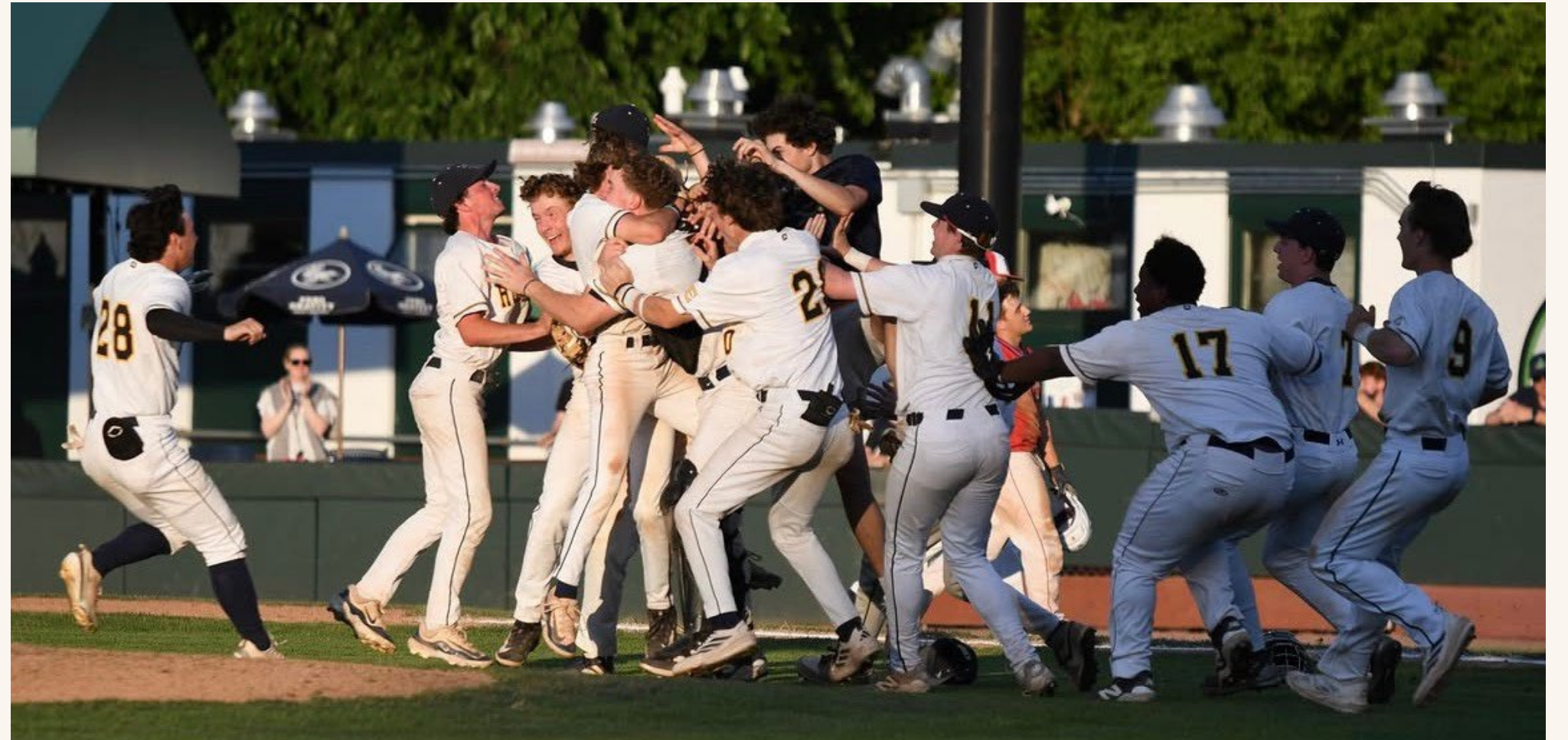
Before we start

Think of one person in your world.
When do they seem most like themselves?

[MENTI.COM](https://www.menti.com)

BELONGING

being accepted as you are—
not as you perform.



MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health isn't the absence of struggle.
It's having places where you're known.

When people **belong**, they're well.

When they only *fit in*, they perform —
and performing is exhausting.

THE PLAN

Three ways to make belonging a strategy

- 1. BUILD IT**—give people somewhere to land (third spaces)
 - 2. NAME IT**—fitting in vs. belonging
 - 3. AUDIT IT**—check your spaces on purpose
- + LIVE IT**—find yours, too

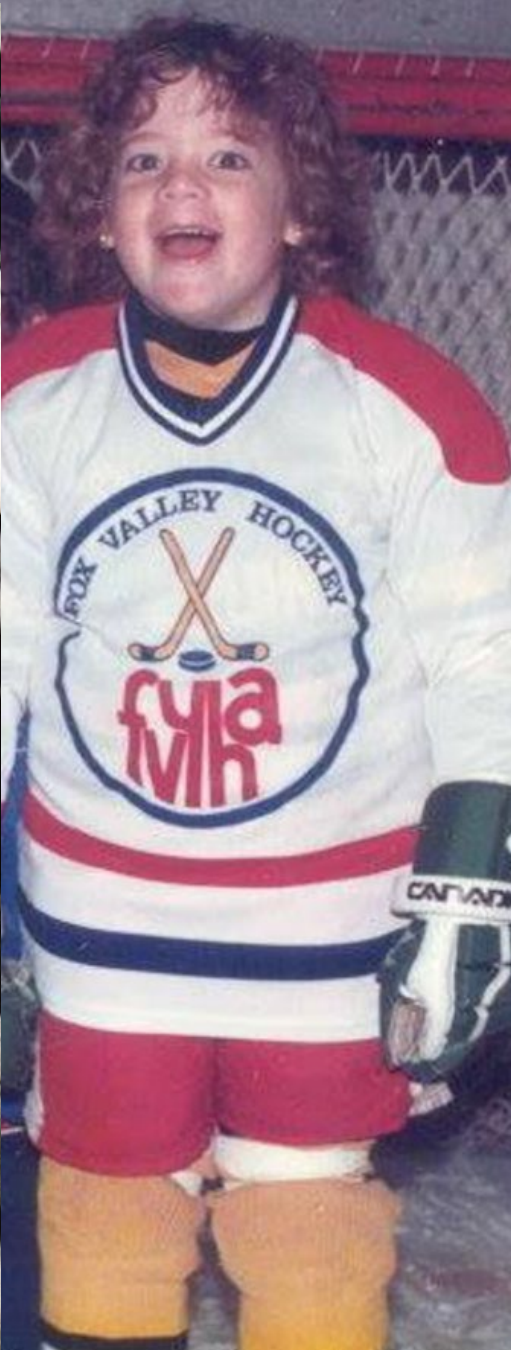
MY STORY

Before "Executive Director," I was:

6- year- old Lauren.

An athlete. A coach.

A teacher. A principal. A mom.



WHY THIS IS MY WORK

Classroom, sideline, board table, state office —same truth everywhere:

People don't rise where they don't belong.

And what we decide at the association table reaches every kid in every member school.

THE EARLY YEARS

We adopted Chace. At five, he wasn't building an identity.

He was *surviving*.

He didn't even know what he liked yet.



THE LONG WINTERS

Vermont winters are long.

Without a team, there's nowhere to land —just months of being a kid no one quite knows.



WHEN HE BELONGS

Two seasons of lacrosse. Same kid —taller.

In on the jokes. Fluent in the team's unspoken language.

Belonging didn't change what he does.

It changed who he gets to be.



"Social rejection registers in the brain like physical pain."

—Lieberman

"Belonging uncertainty quietly drains effort and performance."

—Walton & Cohen

U.S. SURGEON GENERAL, 2023

The U.S. Surgeon General names *loneliness epidemic*—and points to connection as the cure.

—Murthy, 2023

WHAT I ACTUALLY DID

I stopped waiting for the "right" activity. I signed him up.

Equipment came Monday. We committed to six weeks.

Real, not perfect.



Practicing Real, Not Perfect

You can't manufacture identity but you can give a kid somewhere to land.

This season, practicing real not perfect may look like you asking which kids in your member schools have nowhere to land yet —and what your association could sanction, fund, or start so they finally do.

THE TRAP

We teach kids —and ourselves —
to *fit in*, and we call it belonging.

They are not the same thing.

FITTING IN

Read the room, become who they need, get accepted.

BELONGING

Be who you are —
and still be wanted.

Fitting in is a *performance*.

Performance has a mental-health bill —
and it always comes due.



Practicing Real, Not Perfect

The test for any space you run: **do people edit themselves to be here?**

Tomorrow, practicing real not perfect may look like you catching the moment someone shrinks to fit your room —and asking what it would take to let them stay full -size instead. What do they need to be themselves?

STRATEGY 3 · AUDIT IT

Belonging isn't luck.
It's *designed*—or it isn't.

If we don't audit our spaces, we just hope.

Hope isn't a strategy.

WALTON & COHEN

Tiny, well - placed signals of belonging
change whether people *stay, try, and thrive.*

In our association —

who has to work hardest just to feel they belong
at the table?

MENTI.COM

THE AUDIT

Walk your spaces

Run the audit on two levels.

GOVERNANCE / THE POLICY TABLE

- Who's on the board, the committees, the rule - making —and who isn't?
- Whose member schools shape policy, and whose just receive it?
- Do our bylaws and structures assume a "default" school, coach, or kid?
- Who do our officials, coaches, and leaders actually look like?

CULTURE / THE DAILY TABLE

- Who speaks last —or never —in the room?
- Whose name do we mispronounce and move on?
- What do our meetings reward —fitting in, or being real?

Practicing Real, Not Perfect

This year, practicing real not perfect may look like you reading through your policies through a different lens.

Tomorrow, practicing real not perfect may look like you noticing who's dominating the conversation —and brainstorming mechanisms so everyone has a real chance to participate.

We spend all day building belonging for everyone else.

Where's yours?

MY PICKLEBALL

Mine is a pickleball court. I'm not "Executive Director" there. I'm not responsible for anything.

I just show up and get a good workout.



RAY OLDENBURG

Third space—not home, not work.
A place you're known with nothing
required of you.

Connected leaders out-last exhausted ones.

*Strong programs don't come
from depleted people.*

MY RESET

When I feel myself getting edgy, I go back —to the court, or to the last place I truly belonged.

That's the reset.



Practicing Real, Not Perfect

You can't pour belonging from an empty cup.

This week, practicing real not perfect may look like you naming your third space out loud —and putting it on the calendar like it's part of the job.

Because it is.

You won't build perfect belonging.

Build real belonging.

Designed. Audited. Modeled.

For them— and for you.

One thing you'll do differently —

for someone you lead,
OR for yourself.

MENTI.COM

open text · your words close this

THEGRINITIATIVE.COM

Thank you.

Belonging Audit + resources: thegrlinitiative.com

Dr. Lauren Young

Lead Anyway — July 2026