

2026 Mesa County Community Summit

Monday, September 28th | Clifton Community Campus

Registration

8:30 – 9:00 a.m. | Gymnasium

Welcome & Introduction

9:00 – 9:30 a.m. | Gymnasium

Joe Kellerby, Mesa County Child Welfare Division Director

Keynote Address: “I Believe in You” Can Change a Kid’s Life

9:30 – 10:30 a.m. | Room 1

In demanding work, Dr. John Gaines brings a powerful message of connection, encouragement and belief. He explores how believing in a child can change their view of themselves, their future and what’s possible.

Break

10:30 – 10:45 a.m.

Breakout Session 1

10:45 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.

What’s Going On, and What’s an Ally to Do?

Andi Tilmann | Room 3

This workshop-style presentation will use exercises, discussions, data, videos, and processing time with an expert, lived-experience facilitator to promote an understanding of the interrelated functions of socialization, interpersonal rank & power dynamics, and how they combine and interact to result in disproportionate systemic impacts on LGBTQ+, gender-diverse, and other marginalized populations. We will also unpack nonbinary gender and orientation and the detrimental impacts of the current socio-political environment of targeted attacks, misinformation, and legislation.

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The Weight We Carry Lincoln Folkers | Room 1

In his presentation, *The Weight We Carry*, Lincoln invites audiences on a deeply personal journey that explores grief, leadership, resilience, and the invisible burdens each of us carries. Drawing from experiences spanning rural Uganda to Western Colorado, he shares powerful stories that reveal how compassion, connection, and community can lighten even life's heaviest loads. Rather than offering easy answers, Lincoln challenges audiences to reconsider what it means to truly see another person, and how the simple act of helping carry someone else's weight has the power to transform both lives.

Yoga For All Carissa Fisher | Room 5

A restorative practice to breathe, unwind, and reset—space for helpers to care for themselves.

Beyond the File: A Story of Resilience, Advocacy, and Hope Melissa Gutierrez | Room 4

The presentation highlights an important truth for professionals working with youth: meaningful change does not happen overnight. Working with youth is a marathon, not a sprint. Progress can take time, setbacks may happen, and success often requires adults to continue believing in a young person's potential even when the path forward is difficult to see. This session encourages professionals to keep the long-term vision in mind and recognize the lasting impact of patience, persistence, and hope.

Lunch Break | 12 – 1:30 p.m.

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Breakout Session 2

1:30 – 2:45 p.m.

Working with and Supporting LGBTQIA+ & Gender Diverse Youth in a Challenging Moment

Andi Tilmann | Room 3

The workshop will conclude with powerful mitigating resilience & protective factors offering hope for trans-nonbinary youth & adults. Participants will leave with immediately actionable tools, resources, and actions that allies and providers can utilize now to protect, respect, support and be in solidarity with LGBTQ+ and trans-nonbinary clients, family and friends.

Coping For Hope

Bobby Martinez | Room 4

We are a group of former foster youths in here in Grand Junction. We would like to share our experience, struggles, and our success through the foster system and afterwards. We would like to share our stories with you and answer any questions you may have.

Hope Begins with Relationships: Creating a Culture of Connection that Transforms Lives

Lexie Butler | Room 2

Discover how Foster Alumni Mentors (FAM) demonstrates the transformative power of authentic human connection in shaping how people see themselves and their futures. This session explores why hope begins with relationships and how a human-first approach can balance policy with compassion. While people may forget programs, paperwork, or policies, they rarely forget how someone made them feel. Learn how creating spaces where people feel safe, valued, and supported empowers hope to flourish, fostering resilience, confidence, and personal growth.

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Gong Bath for Well-Being

Jere Friedman | Room 5

An hour of deep relaxation and rejuvenation through immersive gong vibrations to rebalance and restore.

Break

2:45 – 3:00 p.m.

Breakout Session 3

3:00 – 4:15 p.m.

Keynote Workshop Session

Dr. John Gaines | Room 1

Explore how personal stories can build trust, strengthen connection, and inspire hope. This workshop offers practical tools for sharing stories that encourage and empower others.

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Dr. John Gaines

Dr. John “Push” Gaines is a former at-risk foster youth turned PhD, best-selling author, and one of America’s most inspiring education speakers.

Known for his authentic presence and raw storytelling, Dr. Gaines helps students, educators, and leaders find strength in their struggles—and the courage to “keep pushing.” Growing up surrounded by drugs, violence, and instability, John beat the odds through faith, mentorship, and education. Today, he’s the founder of PUSH for Dreams, a nonprofit helping youth rise above their circumstances, and has spoken at hundreds of K–12 schools, conferences, NBA camps, and university events across the country. With a doctorate in business, a national profile as one of Yahoo’s “Top 10 Most Influential People,” and a reputation for leaving audiences deeply moved and ready to act, Dr. Gaines equips every audience with the tools to persevere, lead, and dream big—no matter what they’re facing.

Andi Tilmann, MA (they/he/she)

Andi earned an MA in psychology & conflict facilitation at the international Process Work Institute in Portland, OR in 2016, focusing on compassionate anti-oppression work and the psychology of socialization. He is now applying her life-experience as a trans-nonbinary, neuro-divergent, LGBTQ+ person as the Director of the LGBTQ+ nonprofit Loving Beyond Understanding, offering safe spaces, social support, cultural awareness trainings, counseling, vetted resource navigation, LGBTQ+ Peer Specialist career training & services for LGBTQ+ youth, adults and families – and a new safe-space collaborative care clinic for vulnerable populations – serving Grand Junction and surrounding rural communities.

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Lincoln N. Folkers

Lincoln N. Folkers is the Executive Director of The Arc Mesa County and President & CEO of The Sensory Store, where he champions innovative solutions that create opportunity, inclusion, and belonging for people with disabilities. Through advocacy, social enterprise, and community partnerships, he is redefining how communities support individuals and families. In his presentation, *The Weight We Carry*, Lincoln shares powerful stories of grief, resilience, and hope, challenging audiences to recognize the invisible burdens others carry and inspiring them to become people who help lighten the load. Whether speaking to nonprofit leaders, educators, healthcare professionals, faith communities, or corporate audiences, Lincoln leaves people with a renewed sense of hope and a practical challenge: no one was ever meant to carry life's weight alone.

Carissa Fisher

Carissa Fisher is a 200-hour certified Yoga Instructor and has been teaching in various capacities since 2020. She began her journey as a hot yoga instructor at a local studio here in Mesa County. Carissa enjoys teaching in a much more restorative capacity these days, working closely with organizations within Mesa County such as the Lighthouse Project and Child Welfare.

Melissa Gutierrez

Melissa Gutierrez is an Adolescent Supervisor with CPS who has served her community for the past nine years. Throughout her career, she has been dedicated to supporting youth and families through compassion, consistency, and advocacy. Melissa believes that kindness and compassion are the foundation of meaningful connection and positive change, and she brings that philosophy into her work every day while helping guide and support adolescents through challenging circumstances.

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Bobby Martinez

We are a group here in Mesa County who consist of former foster youth. We meet twice a month to work on bettering the system through firsthand advice and experience. Our mission is to make foster care better by foster kids, for foster kids. Through lived experience, advocacy, and community, we work to ensure every child in care is treated with dignity, compassion, and hope for the future.

Lexi Butler

Lexie Butler serves as an Alumni Advocate with Foster Alumni Mentors (FAM), where she supports youth and young adults with foster care, kinship, and adoption experience. Lexie aged out of foster care at 17 after spending much of her life in care. Her lived experience became the foundation for her strength, resilience, and purpose. She has dedicated her work to mentoring, youth empowerment, and leadership development. Her message to young people is: you are capable of more than you've been told, and your story holds power. With the right support and belief in yourself, surviving can turn into leading.

Jere Freidman

Jere Friedman, J.D., M.A., CMMI, is an Employee of the Universe – with full benefits! Jere holds a Masters' degree in Spiritual Psychology and serves as a Soul Centered Coach and ordained minister. As a Gongmaster, Certified Meditation and Mindfulness Instructor, and certified Breathwork Healer, Jere founded Spiral Light Sound & Meditation Center in Grand Junction, Colorado in 2021. Jere retired from his 30+ year practice as a corporate transactional attorney in 2024. Through his coaching practice, sound medicine journeys, and other skills, Jere's life work is to contribute to the evolution of consciousness on Planet Earth by supporting others in finding their own way to joy, fulfillment, and inner peace. As a Soul-Centered Coach, he supports his clients in transforming their lives on the "Soul Line" of life as well as the "Goal Line." Jere regularly facilitates public and private gongbaths and cacao and breathwork ceremonies in Grand Junction, throughout Colorado, and elsewhere. Jere also offers classes and public speaking on a variety of topics.