



KICKING THE STIGMA

Irsay's Mental Health Legacy

By **Symone C. Skrzycki**

Removing barriers to mental health access and helping every Hoosier find care in their community propels Kicking the Stigma, a campaign launched in 2020 by the Jim Irsay family and Indianapolis Colts to address the mental health crisis in Indiana.

The goal is to increase awareness about the prevalence of mental health disorders in communities in addition to raising and distributing funding to nonprofits and other organizations for direct treatment services.

This summer, the Colts were celebrated by ESPN as Sports Humanitarian Team of the Year, presented at the ESPY Awards. Kicking the Stigma has committed \$31 million to mental health awareness, organizations and research, as well as \$6.4 million in action grants distributed to mental health nonprofits. It's also in the public consciousness, reaching 213 million social media impressions via awareness campaigns.

Kalen Jackson, Indianapolis Colts owner and chief brand officer, and president of the Indianapolis Colts Foundation, shares with us her passion for mental health awareness and highlights Kicking the Stigma in this Q&A.

Biz Voice®: How does your dad's role as a champion for mental health awareness contribute to his legacy?

Kalen Jackson: "As my sister Carlie

(Irsay-Gordon) has mentioned, there was no bigger advocate for the Colts, the NFL, the city of Indianapolis and the state of Indiana than our dad. I think you can see examples of his generosity across Indianapolis and Indiana, and in some cases, around the world. And that's just who he was.

"One thing he always used to say was that he was honored to be a steward of the Colts because he was able to use the enormous platform of pro football to bring joy into other people's lives. Whether it was on the field on gamedays or off the field, serving our fans, friends and neighbors in the community, that was his goal every day. He imparted the same philosophy to my sisters

and me and anyone who has ever worn the Horseshoe, and it's important to us to carry on that tradition.

"I'm grateful to him for so many reasons, but especially for his role in launching Kicking the Stigma. Changing the mental health space was extremely important to him. He personally knew what it felt like to feel judged for something that was not under his control. I'm so grateful to him for his bravery in speaking publicly about his journey and for helping Kicking the Stigma grow and make strategic, positive change in this space."

BV: Why is blending mental health and sports such a powerful combination?



Defensive linemen Tyquan Lewis and DeForest Buckner, and former safety Marcel Dabo, at 2023 Colts Training Camp. The Colts held a joint service project with the visiting Chicago Bears, which included working with The Milk Bank to assemble kits with mental health information, resources and notes of support to mothers who lost a child late term.



Running back Jonathan Taylor at 2024 Colts Training Camp, where the team held a joint service project with the visiting Arizona Cardinals, which included writing notes of support and assembling “kindness kits” that were delivered to a local elementary school.

KJ: “Our society pays attention to sports. People of all ages and walks of life have idolized athletes for as long as anyone can remember. They are bigger, stronger and faster than the rest of us, and we marvel at their extraordinary talent and commitment to their craft. We think of them, especially in football, as superhuman or modern-day gladiators.

“We think of their invincibility, not that they, too, may be suffering in silence. But when one of our players opens up and shares his own vulnerability, it speaks volumes to the rest of us. It’s an example of how being vulnerable is truly a strength.

“When we first introduced this topic to our players, we were so pleasantly surprised by the number who stepped up to share their own stories and get behind our effort. Some of our highest-profile players, past and present, like Jonathan Taylor, Anthony Richardson, Ryan Kelly, Shaquille Leonard, Zaire Franklin, DeForest Buckner, Kenny Moore II, Braden Smith and others, bravely used their voices to help people know they are not alone.

“Science, as well as personal testimonies from individuals and their families, supports the power of sharing stories and starting conversations. That’s why our players are such an important group to hear from. When they share their own vulnerability, that sends a strong message that, ‘It’s OK to not be OK.’”

BV: **There are so many facets to mental health. What catapulted intentional awareness, community collaboration, purposeful philanthropy and systemic change to the top of the list as Kicking**

the Stigma’s four pillars of focus?

KJ: “While we were assessing the future direction of Kicking the Stigma, it was important for us to further narrow how the effort impacts the mental health sector. Kicking the Stigma’s foundation was built on using the power of the Colts’ platform to bring awareness to the stigma surrounding mental health, and this has been the bedrock pillar since day one. With that said, we also recognized early on that while awareness is key to reducing stigma, it was also important to fund programs in this space to ensure short-term and long-term access to care for individuals in need.

“Over the past few years, we’ve prioritized community collaboration and our ability to bring other individuals and organizations alongside us to put mental health in the spotlight. To make meaningful change in this space, we know awareness should, and thankfully does, go well beyond Kicking the Stigma.

“Finally, as the first pro sports franchise to make mental health a priority initiative, we believe it’s our role to help make meaningful systemic change on how mental health is viewed and talked about, especially in the sports community.”

BV: **Kicking the Stigma encompasses a variety of programs such as an annual fundraiser, annual game, annual awareness campaign, annual service project, My Cause My Cleats initiative and community events. As you think about your experiences working on those initiatives and their impact, what**

emotion does that elicit within you?

KJ: “It gives me great hope. Since our launch in 2020, the response from our fans and others committed to mental health has been inspiring. The number of people and organizations across the country who have reached out to be involved, donate or just share their own personal stories are countless. We feel like we touched a nerve, in a very positive way, and it showed us how urgent the need for these conversations is. But it also showed us people are as ready as they’ve ever been to talk about mental health and confront it head on.

“I also feel great gratitude toward so many others who have supported this effort. I’ve already mentioned my dad and our players who shared their voices, but I’ve also had the chance to meet so many mental health professionals, researchers, clinicians and others in Indiana and beyond who have dedicated their lives to helping others. Their tireless work and impact inspire me every day.”

BV: **Talk about Kicking the Stigma’s Action Grant Program. As of 2025, there are two grant opportunities: the Legacy Action Grant and the Community Action Grant. What was the catalyst for offering two grant opportunities versus one and how are they different?**

KJ: “When we started Kicking the Stigma, ending the stigma was our primary goal, and that remains important. But we thought the best way to do more was to directly support the people and organizations doing the day-to-day work in communities across the city and state. Through our grant program, we’re able to spotlight nonprofits that are creating real change and could be doing so much more if they had more funding and recognition.

“As such, Kicking the Stigma has offered action grants since 2021, and to date we’ve given out \$6.4 million in grants to 60 nonprofits and organizations on the front lines of delivering mental health services.

“This year, we launched a new grant format to create a more strategic and lasting impact in this space. Our Community Action Grant will serve 10 organizations a year, primarily in Indiana, with a contribution of up to \$25,000 to fund evidence-based programs and services. Our Legacy Action Grant is an invite-only grant that allows Kicking the Stigma to invest in multi-year funding opportunities for evidence-based programs and services at a higher financial level to serve larger populations and better create lasting impact.”