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JESUIT SOCIAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE
LOYOLA UNIVERSITY NEW ORLEANS

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"To Understand Your Past Is Your Power": Loyola-Rayburn's Student-Led Mental Health Retreat

This summer, the *Loyola Rayburn Student Government Association (Loy-Ray SGA)* planned and hosted its first retreat. **The Loy-Ray SGA designed the retreat to focus on mental health and to benefit the larger community at Rayburn.** In collaboration with JSRI staff, SGA officers and planning committee members from the larger student body requested speakers, planned breakout activities, and invited guests from Rayburn's Sober Living dorms to create a truly unique experience for everyone who participated.

The retreat began with a keynote presentation from Dr. Denise Gilstrap entitled, *"Understanding Trauma: How Our Experiences Shape Us."* Students gained valuable insight about trauma responses in our minds and bodies. One student reflected, *"The ability to understand your past is power."* **The impact of this presentation was palpable in the room, as students asked engaging questions and reflected on how this information helped them understand themselves and others in a deeper way.** One student shared, *"To learn that there are others that are in survivor mode was a big release because we hide things deep, deep down."*

After the keynote presentation, the JayCees club at Rayburn catered lunch, and participants engaged in personal reflection and informal small group discussions with guiding questions. The rest of the afternoon consisted of breakout groups of participants' choice. There was a room dedicated to silent meditation with optional printed guides, as well as the opportunity to speak with spiritual directors from various faith backgrounds. Hunter Darrouzet from Loyola's Student Life and Ministry department and two incarcerated religious leaders from Rayburn were available for one-on-one meetings.

Ash Bayer from Loyola's University Counseling Center created a space for breathing and grounding exercises. **Many students reflected on how powerful it was to be reminded of the importance of breath in regulating emotions.** Kelsey McLaughlin, Loyola Rayburn's Advisor and Support Coordinator, offered the opportunity for students to engage in expressive arts activities, with many gravitating towards meditative coloring sheets.



The day closed out as a powerful storm rolled through the area and the power went out. A Loyola-Rayburn student performed a compelling and passionate spoken word poem about personal experiences with mental health throughout his life, popular views on mental health, and the need for more mental health awareness.

Loyola's student body at Rayburn, along with the broader community at the prison, continues to express interest in mental health resources.

During her talk, Dr. Gilstrap provided a list of books to develop a deeper understanding of the impacts of trauma in our lives. JSRI is working to provide copies of these books to the library at Rayburn.

If you are interested in contributing to this effort, as well as similar programming in the future, **you can donate [here](#) and indicate that your gift should go towards "Loyola Rayburn Fund."** We appreciate your support, as does everyone at Rayburn.

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