**Headline:** Meet the Collective Offering an Alternative to the ‘Mental Health Industrial Complex’ for Underserved Communities

**Teaser:** The Fireweed Collective offers online and in-person healing.

By Damon Orion

**Author Bio:** Damon Orion is a writer, journalist, musician, artist, and teacher in Santa Cruz, California. His work has appeared in Revolver, Guitar World, Spirituality + Health, Classic Rock, High Times, and other publications. Read more of his work at [DamonOrion.com](https://damonorion.com/).

**Source:** Local Peace Economy

**Credit Line:** *This article was produced by* [*Local Peace Economy*](https://independentmediainstitute.org/local-peace-economy/)*.*

**Tags:** Social Justice, Human Rights, Health Care, Community, Activism, Immigration, North America/United States of America, North America/Puerto Rico, North America/Mexico, Opinion

**[Article Body:]**

In 2024, for the sixth consecutive year, the Trevor Project’s U.S. National Survey on the Mental Health of LGBTQ+ Young People [found](https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2024/) “a significant association between anti-LGBTQ+ victimization and disproportionately high rates of suicide risk.” The study stated that 50 percent of LGBTQ+ youth did not have access to the mental health care they sought. It also concluded that LGBTQ+ young people of color were more prone to suicide attempts than their white peers.

The mental health benefits provider Lyra [noted](https://www.lyrahealth.com/blog/bipoc-mental-health/) in a June 2023 article that Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) are less likely than white people to get treatment for mental illness “due to cultural barriers, stigma, and lack of access to care,” adding that “[t]hese disparities can have a serious impact on BIPOC mental health.”

According to the [National Alliance on Mental Illness](https://www.nami.org/your-journey/identity-and-cultural-dimensions/black-african-american/), “shared experience[s]” also influences a person’s mental health and healing process. “Being treated or perceived as ‘less than’ because of the color of your skin can be stressful and even traumatizing. Additionally, members of the Black community face structural challenges accessing the care and treatment they need.”

[Fireweed Collective](https://fireweedcollective.org/), a small co-op focusing on mental health education, healing justice, and mutual aid, provides care for these underserved communities through support groups, workshops, and webinars. No one is denied service for lack of funds.

Fireweed’s support groups include a space for QTPOC (queer and trans people of color), a weekly writing group for people of color, and meetings for disabled, chronically ill, and neurodivergent individuals. Its webinars have covered subjects like coping with physical and psychiatric disabilities and reducing harm while coming off psychiatric medication. It also offers online resources like a [crisis tool kit](https://fireweedcollective.org/crisis-toolkit/) and the document [Madness and Oppression: Paths to Personal Transformation and Collective Liberation](https://fireweedcollective.org/publication/madness-oppression-paths-to-personal-transformation-and-collective-liberation/), [which](https://fireweedcollective.org/publication/madness-oppression-paths-to-personal-transformation-and-collective-liberation/) “examines the intersections of oppression with mental health struggles” and provides step-by-step action to help people create their own wellness documents.

Fireweed’s peer support and mutual aid lead [Antoinette Chen See](https://fireweedcollective.org/person/antoinette-chen-see/) says that like most of its support group members, this organization’s management team comprises “disabled, chronically ill, Black and Brown, queer and trans, working class, and immigrants or children of immigrants. We share our people’s tools and knowledge in our webinars and workshops and highlight those practices from our diverse communities.”

Fireweed emerged from the Icarus Project, a small mutual aid group founded in the early 2000s for “survivors of the psych system and the mental health industrial complex,” according to Chen See. While she says Icarus’s work “was important and benefited us all,” Chen See notes, “Like many spaces, when the most marginalized of us are not in leadership, as we’ve been pushed out historically, it is a ground for violence and oppression to proliferate.”

In 2020, the organization shifted the focus of its leadership, programming, and partnerships to “disabled people, Black folks, people of color, immigrants, and queer and trans folks and their needs,” the group’s website [states](https://fireweedcollective.org/our-history/). With this restructuring came a name change from the Icarus Project to Fireweed Collective.

Chen See notes that when the Icarus Project figuratively burned up like its mythological namesake, the group “needed to remediate soil and get grounded again. The fireweed is one of the first blossoms after the forest fire, and it’s a plant that flourishes in scorched earth. It’s a remediator of the soil.”

She adds that Fireweed’s view of severe mental illness comes from a disability justice perspective. This involves “seeing ourselves as individual points on a gigantic bell curve of human diversity” and understanding “that there is no right or wrong way to have a body-mind. So mental illness, along with altered states, suicidality, and other forms of expression, big, small, or intense, are all normal responses to trauma brought on by oppression.”

Fireweed’s site [states](https://fireweedcollective.org/mission-vision-values/) that systemic oppression is often reproduced by the mental health system. Expanding on that idea, Chen See explains that she and her colleagues “make sure we’re staying with our people and not perpetuating the violence of the mental health industrial complex,” which “continues to carry out its lineage as a [sane-ist](https://medium.com/artfullyautistic/the-explanation-we-need-with-using-ableist-and-saneist-language-but-the-conversation-we-have-to-e22bacef166), ableist, anti-queer, anti-Black institution.”

This, she says, includes the surveillance state. “So many people who come through our spaces are coming through cautiously because we are survivors of violence and surveillance as Black and Brown people. Many of us with diagnoses have to interact with the surveillance state, which has physical and mortal effects on our world. We try to make our spaces as surveillance-free as possible because it is the difference between life and death for many of us.”

Chen See summarizes Fireweed’s healing justice approach with a quote from “Mountain Moving Day,” an essay by the disabled Puerto Rican writer and activist Aurora Levins Morales: “There is no neutral body from which our bodies deviate. Society has written deep into each strand of tissue of every living person on earth. What it writes into the heart muscles of five-star generals is distinct from what it writes in the pancreatic tissue and intestinal tracts of Black single mothers in Detroit, of Mexicana migrants in Fresno, but no body stands outside the consequences of injustice and inequality.”