

THE CHANGEMAKER » Alumni making waves

MINDFULNESS FOR MINORS

RODNEY SALOMON AND MYCHAL MILLS ARE USING HOLISTIC INTERVENTION TO HELP CHILDREN IN AT-RISK COMMUNITIES STEER CLEAR OF TROUBLE.

BY MOLLY PETRILLA

A roomful of second-graders are all giving themselves a hug. From there it's hands to hearts, then arms outstretched as wide as they can go. Through each movement, they repeat after Rodney Salomon '10, who stands several feet taller than all of them and calls out in a baritone singsong:

*I love myself. (I love myself.)
I love my body. (I love my body.)
I love my heart. (I love my heart.)
I love my soul. (I love my soul.)*

These self-affirming kids are part of a youth development movement that Salomon and fellow alum Mychal Mills '11 '13 have now brought to 3,200 students, 500 educators, and 25 schools across New Jersey. Launched in 2014, their Kon-scientious Youth Development & Services (KYDS) program teaches meditation, yoga-based movement, and other mindfulness techniques to kids of all ages in an effort to help them resist drugs and alcohol, walk away from fights, and settle into self-love and inner peace.

Most of Mills and Salomon's work has been in the Asbury Park School District, where KYDS now runs programming daily from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. in an elementary, middle, and high

school. (Next year they will be in all five Asbury Park schools.) It's a district in which almost 90% of high school students are considered low income, and many don't graduate. Violence is common. Some kids come to school hungry, or with an uncertain housing situation, or a shaky support system at home.

"We know we can't solve all the problems that the kids are going through externally," says Salomon, "but if we give them tools to face those challenges from a better space internally, they're going to be in a better place to deal with things than before."

"It's about hitting the root cause of why a student is actually turning to drugs or fighting," Mills adds.

He and Salomon have seen the results of their work take many forms over the past five years. Mills remembers a middle-school girl who came to the program "closed off to herself,"

BEYOND SCHOOLS

"Our vision is for a more balanced community and world," says Mychal Mills. That's why he and Rodney Salomon don't contain their program work to schools. They maintain a busy schedule of community meditation, yoga, and open mic events throughout Asbury Park and Ocean Township. Last fall, KYDS collaborated with Associate Professor Deanna Shoemaker and her communication graduate students, helping them better understand and connect with local residents for an Asbury Park oral history project.

OPPOSITE: Xxxxx

unable to participate in an exercise that required looking into a mirror and calling herself beautiful.

"Last year she was almost always in a fight," he says. "This year she's staying out of drama. She's always full of love and light. It may take a year or even three years, but eventually the seed [we are planting] will blossom."

The KYDS founders knew each other in passing at Monmouth—mostly because Mills was often assigned to guard Salomon in intramural basketball games—but reconnected several years after graduation when they volunteered at the same soup kitchen. Both were searching for ways to better the world. Eventually they landed on the idea for KYDS.

Throughout the process of building their program, Mills sought guidance from both his former Monmouth professors and ones he never studied with as a student. And both men credit the University with starting them on their journeys to self-discovery.

What began as a passion project has now become a thriving nonprofit organization, with four additional staff members, frequent calls from interested schools, and a slate of services including an eight-week mindfulness program, a physical education replacement workshop, and group sessions for teachers, administrators, and community members.

"A lot of youth, they need these services," says Mills. "I think this is something that's continuously going to grow."

Adds Salomon: "We want to serve as many schools as we can without losing our essence."



photo ANTHONY DEPRIMO