

## Healing Children One Community and One Breath at a Time by Awakin Call Editors

JG Larochette is a former classroom teacher, community organizer, and mentor in Richmond, CA who is the Founder and Executive Director of the Mindful Life Project. Since its founding in the Fall of 2012, Mindful Life Project has focused on empowering underserved students through training in mindfulness, expressive arts, yoga, and mindful hip-hop in Richmond, CA, one of the cities with historically the most generational poverty and violence in the United States. The organization has served 15,000 students, trained hundreds of teachers, principals, Richmond Police Officers, and the local District Attorney's Office, to create a mindful and compassionate community and to foster self-awareness, impulse-control, confidence, and resiliency. What follows is the edited transcript of an Awakin Call interview with JG Larochette. You can listen to or read the full interview [here](#).

Audrey Lin: I know that after you graduated from college, you felt a calling to work with kids. Could you share what brought you to begin working with at-risk youth in Richmond?

JG: At college, when I was at a job fair, there was one job that popped out because it was about playing with kids. I didn't see myself as a teacher but I knew my first love was sports and being outside, so I took that job as quickly as I could. Kids are so authentic and so real and present. They might have trauma and oppression, sometimes generations of oppression, but they have fewer layers of conditioning than adults do.

Ever since I was about six, I remember feeling the need to bring awareness and love to communities that have been through racist, oppressive, and educational inequities—that have been neglected or pushed away. I remember going to a Native American reservation in New Mexico at six years old and having convulsions right when we drove into town. I didn't understand why I was shaking—I wasn't sick, and I wasn't scared, necessarily. Over the next ten to fifteen years, I started realizing that social justice—pain and suffering, especially of people of color—were my kind of fire; it was something that I felt so strongly, that needed to be worked with and supported in creating strong communities.

So it was interesting—at six years old, you don't expect to be having this life-changing moment.

Since then, I've been working with what's going on inside myself when I encounter communities that have oppression and pain and suffering, as well as what this means in the global sphere.

Audrey: Wow. When I was six, I was watching Sesame Street and learning to count.

JG: Right, but that's a good thing! And for me, I didn't know what was going on exactly. I didn't know how to handle it. Then when I started going to Oakland, I

realized, "Ohhh . . . Open heart, have fun, smile a lot, feel compassion, be present, and that is all the kids need."

Audrey: Can you share how you went into teaching and then decided to begin Mindful Life Project?

JG: I was twenty-three years old; the classrooms were chaotic but overall, on the playground, I was able to transform violence into play. From kickball to four square to basketball, it really is amazing to see when kids are guided in productive play.

Next, I went to play baseball in Europe, then decided to travel in Europe. When I came back in December of 2003, I got a call from Playworks saying, "There's a school in Richmond—the coach quit, so we need someone to take over for two weeks." I had just gotten back, broke, and I was like, "Sure, two weeks of making money playing with kids, why not?"

I grew up in Berkeley, which is like five or six miles from Richmond. Media portrayal was always saying how it was the most violent place in the country, so I went in with the concept that this is not the place for me. And the kids responded the same way. So I felt totally misaligned—my heart, my body, and my mind were not in one place. For two weeks I couldn't sleep. I couldn't eat. I was so hit by the trauma and the violence that was occurring, but I was more scared about how my body and mind and heart were reacting.

By the end of the second week, I could barely open my eyes. Of course, the principal and the Playworks director said, "Hey, do you want to stay?" I was thinking, "Are you serious? Have you seen what has been going on?" But they said they saw something special in me, so I reflected on it. I realized that I hadn't opened my heart completely to the kids. So I decided to give it a chance.

The next Monday, I went to school with a whole new mindset. It wasn't about feeling the layers of trauma; it was more about feeling my heart layers and letting those heart layers come out. And in the next week or two, it was just magical. It's hard to explain, but there is this piece of love and connection that kids can give when they have suffered, more I think than others do. The playground became the safe place I always wanted it to be. The kids were playing sports and there weren't as many fights anymore. The culture of the school started changing.

Then I realized that our classrooms need to be fun; they need to be full of love and compassion. The last thing our kids need in the classroom is more stress. What they really need is a safe, contained area where they can trust the adult and share.

So I became a classroom teacher and it was magical. Classroom after classroom was like one love affair after another. Kids started having more success. We were having more success in the test scores. That was good in a way, but bad in another way; the students that had the most trauma, that were caught in behaviors of violence, that could not be fully present in that space because they didn't feel safe, started getting pushed further and further out of the classroom. And that is the school-to-prison pipeline that the United States has—especially with African-American and Latino boys who are being labeled as the "bad kids" as early as four or five years old.

I started realizing that our school system was so flawed. And No Child Left Behind, and the idea that test scores are the most important aspect of education, really started creating

an internal war. And I didn't have a personal self-care practice. I tried yoga and that was helping, but it wasn't fully the self-care that I needed. After about six or seven years I started feeling like the educational system was an engine, and I had a wrench, trying to fix it, and I couldn't.

Audrey: Could you share more about when you realized you weren't opening your heart when you came to Richmond? What was it that changed?

JG: I reached the bottom, in terms of deep anxiety where I didn't feel like I was in my body. I had nightmares about the kids and the violence they were dealing with, but then there was a dream where everything felt lighter, the space looked lighter, and the kids were smiling more. And I realized even if we have all the suffering in the world, a smile can turn that around. I remember walking around the playground for the next couple of days, and instead of reacting with "You shouldn't be mad, you shouldn't be fighting" I would be like, "Give me a hug, let's go talk."

Before, I felt like I had to do all the healing for them and for myself, and that felt overwhelming. Then I realized that all I have to do is be there, be a loving person, and be open, and then the changes will happen. Again, I was twenty-three, so I wasn't that wise. (laughs) I just knew my heart was yearning to share love, especially around communities of color. I've felt a lot of resentment toward the way I've been entitled by being a white male. That entitlement felt like guilt. Then I realized that my skin color has nothing to do with what is inside of me. It has nothing to do with what is inside other people.

I remember going in with this new mindset that there will be fights and there will be anger and there will be violence. But if I can transform my own heart into brightly shining light, then they will reflect that. That's the biggest message that I tell teachers. If we are stressed, fearful, and reactive, the kids are going to be the same way. And if we are authentic, compassionate, and mindful, they'll reflect that. And with communities where pain and suffering has been for hundreds of years, you are going to have to be patient. It's not going to happen overnight.

Audrey: From there, how did Mindful Life Project come about? I remember you sharing how it almost created itself.

JG: After eight or nine years, I was really engaged in the community. I did community organizing, advocacy, coaching, and supporting parents. I built a really authentic relationship with the community.

As I mentioned earlier, I felt like service was the only way. I also didn't realize the importance of filling myself up with self-care. So in 2011—I had gotten Teacher Excellence awards, the Teacher of the Year award, but from the first day of school, I was not aligned again. My body felt like it was being stretched apart—because of the issues and challenges my students were facing, as well as personal challenges. I hit a big bout of anxiety and depression. From September to December, it was the deepest form of suffering I had ever encountered. No sleep, trying to pop pills to sleep, to do whatever it took to be somewhat functional. It was awful.

I still tried to be in the classroom, even though I missed a couple of days every couple of weeks. I was trying to do my best, but a couple of weeks before winter vacation, I told the boys and girls—they were third graders; they knew I wasn't fully present for them—and I really apologized and told them I needed to figure it out. So I left for two

weeks.

I tried therapy and yoga and that was somewhat helpful. But there was still something truly missing, so I took this meditation class. They told me to get on my knees -- and I had never done meditation before, mind you -- for an hour and clear my mind. Then they walked out of the room. And I think I hit the furthest place of suffering that hour, because I was so mad at myself.

Then someone mentioned Spirit Rock, founded by Jack Kornfield. This was so radical, to just pay attention to the present moment without judgment. And that really hit me, because I was judging myself for suffering. So over the next few weeks, I really got into mindfulness. I took an online course and I went to Spirit Rock and I started learning from Mindful Schools, an organization that trains teachers. By the third week, I started coming back to myself.

And I went back to my classroom and said, "Boys and girls, it is so good to see you. A new year, a new me." (laughs) So I had them get in a mindful position and said, "We are going to work on listening to sound and focusing on breath for two minutes." These thirty third graders just looked at me like, "What? This is what you left for? Just so we could focus on sounds and breathing?"

So I rang the bell and they got really still and silent. And we focused on sound for a minute. Then we focused on breath for a minute, and then I rang the bell again. But the kids didn't open their eyes, like I asked them to. They were so still, and the energy in the room started getting more and more light.

By the fourth minute, I thought they were messing with me.

The fifth minute went by, and at the sixth minute, some eyes started gently opening. By the seventh minute, no one was talking; I said, "I want to hear your voice. What did that feel like?" They said, "I felt the safest I've ever felt," "I felt peace that I've never felt before," "I felt so connected" -- the most beautiful things. And that is when we started it -- Mindful Life Project. Every morning we would start with mindfulness for ten or fifteen minutes. We put together our own little curriculum. And we brought in yoga once a week. We invited an expressive arts teacher -- trying to access our inner resilience and at the same time trying to express ourselves and create healing inside and outside.

In May or June, the third graders heard that sixteen kids from India were coming, doing a show called Ekatva. Mindful Life Project had been learning a song by MC Yogi called "Be the Change You Wish to See." We decided we would have Ekatva come to our school and when they arrived we would be on the blacktop on our knees bowing out of respect, and when they walked on, we would sing the song. And that moment was pure magic.

I really learned from Nimo and the ServiceSpace community; I realized what service, love, and mindfulness was. So I thought, "I'm going to take a leap. I'm going to be just like them." I left the classroom -- no funding, no money, no anything.

The first year we served 150 kids at three local schools doing small group work: mindfulness, yoga, expressive arts and hip-hop. Then we went in the classrooms the next year and taught every kid in those three schools plus two more.

Audrey: For folks who don't know: Nimo, who is a rap artist, spent some time at the Gandhi Ashram in India and they put together a show called Ekatva. It's these sixteen kids

from the slums who spent three years creating this show together. Then they ended up coming out to perform the show in different places like UC Berkeley.

How has the Mindful Life Project evolved over the last three years and what does the typical class look like?

JG: I wanted to focus on our most at-risk kids, especially our African-American boys. That first year was focused on working with kids who most need it. During a regular school day, we would pull them out for about fifty minutes. In those sessions, we would do mindfulness: stillness practice, learning how to navigate our emotions and our thoughts, how to find the breath, find our senses, and be fully present without judgment. Then we'd weave in using mindfulness to express yourself through yoga, expressive arts, and hip-hop.

We noticed that students were accessing the skills we were teaching them, but when they got to class, many did not feel they were a valued member of the room. So they didn't access the skills very well in the classrooms, especially where there was chaos and reactivity both from students and adults.

The second year, we saw that there was power in working with kids who need support the most, but there was also something missing: mindful and compassionate classrooms. It's challenging to be a teacher with so much turmoil around you. We felt we needed to push into class to create cohesion and compassion as a school. So we started teaching mindfulness lessons that were culturally relevant, making sure that whatever we did was engaging and that there was shared ownership. The skill we were teaching was already in our students and we were going to guide them back to it.

That second year planted the seeds for more awareness for teachers. About thirty to forty percent of teachers participated in the lessons.

The third year, there were two communities left that really had deep oppression, in the iron triangle in North Richmond. So we decided to spread to every part of Richmond, to every kid.

Then we added the Mindful Educator Fellowship. We knew that our teachers needed the self-practice to be their full selves and be present. We trained around ninety teachers over the last year in six-week sessions. It was really mindfulness for personal well-being--creating a daily practice, a daily awareness.

Now in our fourth year we serve about ninety percent of the kids in a city of about 100,000 people in Richmond, California.

We launched an app for parents and teachers. Being able to do the mindful sits at home as a family has been crucial. Teachers who didn't feel confident enough to teach mindfulness on their own now just use the app.

We reach almost seven thousand kids weekly in fifteen schools. We've seen the quiet revolution spreading far and wide. It's so beautiful to see; three years ago, the district didn't even want to hear about it, and now our programs are in almost all the schools. The buy-in is tremendous. We do concerts. We do mindful hip-hop.

Audrey: You mention the "Quiet Revolution." There are a lot of conflicting views about this. Where do you stand?

JG: We use secular mindfulness, but it comes from Vipassana insight meditation. What I'm concerned about is—we can look at yoga, for example. Yoga in the United States has really been disrespectful of the true meaning of yoga. At Mindful Life, we really believe in honoring the past of these traditions as well as the present. Some communities want to make sure that it is secular; as long as the people teaching it have been trained by people who really understand the ancient traditions, I'm not concerned at all.

I am concerned, though, that someone can train for two hours on a curriculum with mindfulness in it, and then teach it. To me that is deeply unaligned with what this is all about, which is human-to-human connection. Mindful Life Project, fortunately and unfortunately, is the biggest direct service mindfulness nonprofit in the country. It's unfortunate because there are others, curriculum-based, spreading mindfulness in ways that don't keep the integrity. One that does is Mindful Schools, which requires a personal practice. They offer online and personal trainings by practiced mentors, and then you can go to curriculum training and they support you as you go on. Others give you two hours of online training and a scientific curriculum—which is powerful stuff, but research shows that when a teacher without social and emotional intelligence tries teaching social and emotional intelligence, children become reactive.

We really want to see more direct service. I don't want my daughter learning music online; I want her learning from a musician. I don't want our kids using technology to learn wisdom practices. I want to show that what really changes lives is not curriculums, it's people. My fifteen-person staff is phenomenal. Even if they were just in the room without teaching any skills, they are already making an impact on the kid's life. Then add on the teaching and the way we teach it, it is getting back to what changes us -- compassion, love, care. And that doesn't happen over curriculum or online trainings.

Audrey: I also wanted to know, how has this journey influenced your kids?

JG: My parents are world-renowned artists and one thing they never did was force me to learn art. I took that hint from them, because I have other friends whose parents did put pressure on them to do certain things. Gabriella, who's six, goes to school in Richmond. She's getting mindfulness from other teachers. When I tried bringing it up, she was like, "Daddy, let me teach you how to do mindfulness (laughs)." She definitely owns that she knows it better than I do.

Jonah was born into Mindful Life Project; he has always loved the mindful hip-hop songs. He knows them by heart. He created his own thing called "rest time". Every time he looks like he is going to have a tantrum, I'll say, "Focus on your mindful breath," and he quickly finds the breath. And when he goes to school and he's feeling overwhelmed, he'll tell the teacher, "I need my rest time." He'll go for thirty or forty minutes in stillness, quietly breathing. One day I dropped him off at school, and he said, "Daddy, I'm going right to rest time." He knew he was sad he was leaving me.

All we can do as loving adults is embody the practice. And when there's interest that arises, don't pressure it. (laughs)

Deven: We have one question from someone who wanted to be on the call but had a conflicting event. There is an organization that offers a six-week program for teenagers who have been caught with drugs or alcohol at school. The intention is to expose teens to life-affirming activities. This organization asked her to do mindfulness, but come up with a really fun curriculum. Do you have an idea of how to make mindfulness fun?

JG: It has to be relevant. In Richmond, we make sure kids understand that they already have mindfulness, but we are trying to make it engaging. We have a lot of chants and call and response.

For example, there's one we use a lot in mindful breathing. We have the kids say: "My mind was drifting, but now it's stopped. I found my anchor spot." Before we do a mindful sit, we get the kids' voices in there. A lot of times as teachers we try to give information without realizing that kids need to know that this is theirs. When they own it, that changes it. So before we get in our positions, we'll have the kids repeat after us: "I've got my feet on the floor. I've got my spine in a line, I've got my hands in my lap, I've got my heart to the sky. Now close your eyes." And the kids will say, "All right."

If it's teenagers who are out in nature, for example—just by being with the breeze touching your skin, you are being mindful; close your eyes in stillness and see what it feels like to feel the breeze, while fully present, without being distracted by sight or sound.

My biggest advice is, combine what it means to be in stillness with what their culture is. For teenagers, how relevant is this for them? Why are they doing drugs--because they are in deep pain and suffering? So what other ways are there to release that, other than drugs and alcohol? Make it relevant. Give examples of people they might relate to who have a mindfulness practice.

Deven: We have another comment from Jane in San Diego: "When I listen to you and think about all the resources working in the Oakland and Richmond area, I feel such a longing to have this kind of work in our inner-city schools in San Diego. Can you recommend resources for schools not in the Bay area, to get started in bringing these resources and programs to even more students? "

JG: It really comes down to a grassroots thing. In San Diego, there's a great conference called "Bridging Hearts and Minds" coming up in February. Find like-minded people that can create a community. Then it starts building organically from the community. For training, go to Mindful Schools and find out if they have any online trainings for the personal practice, if you need it. But really, find the community down there. I was lucky in Richmond to have a principal who believed in me, families who would stand up for me. Finding your allies is super important.

About curriculum or trainings, just email me at [jg@mindfullifeproject.org](mailto:jg@mindfullifeproject.org). I'm happy to share, to support people doing it in their own community.

Deven: We have one more comment. Sally says, "I'm a Montessori teacher assistant that would like to incorporate some mindfulness in my classroom. What would you suggest adding into the classroom aside from the Silence Game?"

JG: Montessori schools are very mindful already. My son is in a Montessori preschool. For little kids, a very important piece of mindfulness is mindful movement. I always weave in some animal yoga, for example. In terms of the practice, if we give kids complete silence for two minutes, their minds are probably fully distracted; so just bring in a little guidance. There are some good Youtube pieces for kids on mindfulness. Once it comes from an authentic place, when you have a personal practice, that's the kind of thing kids are going to absorb. One book I recommend is called "Mindful Monkey, Happy Panda";

Deven: We have one more question.

Caller: I know you played collegiate baseball. Alfie Kohn says that compassion-based and achievement-based schools are contradictory. So how do you balance compassion and competitiveness in your own life and the lives of the children?

JG: Either age or mindfulness has made me less competitive (laughs). I still have some competitiveness; but before, the competitiveness was really negative. I'm just more at peace when it arises. I don't find myself feeling anger when I'm losing at tennis.

If we want to change school cultures, compassion can't come with the achievement focus that we have in schools. If your North Star is making sure every kid can read at a fifth-grade level and they're third graders, what culture are you creating in your room?

Reading is fundamental, but if we create a stressful environment, we counteract education. Education should be character and content. If we forget about the social-emotional aspect, it's going to create stress and chaos. Academics will improve when you change it to a mindful, compassionate community.

We want kids to go to college and have thriving lives, but we're not going to get there by pushing academics down their throat. We get there by pushing love and compassion. I used to lose about an hour a day in classroom management; by the sixth week of mindfulness, I was down to fifteen minutes. The same thing is happening in our inner cities. Not because the kids are bad, but because they are expressing their trauma the only way they know how, classrooms are not fully functional. So, using mindfulness, compassion, and empathy, we reach the kids where they are. Then they will be able to learn.

In this country, seventy to ninety percent of hospital visits are stress related. We do believe that we are slowing both the internal and external world by practicing mindfulness. We want to emphasize for kids -- Yes, you want to play video games, but it is nine o'clock in the morning, and you have school. Does that serve you? Or, Your mind is racing, does that serve you? It is just this constant reflection of whether we're here, mind, body, and heart. If we are not, no judgment. Just come back. That is the invitation that we offer.

In Mindful Life we have water, which is mindfulness, compassion, and empathy. And we have fire; we have music, hip-hop, activities, and movement. And life is a balance, so there is a place for each of those. When we are sitting in stillness, try to let fire be far away from you to let water come in. When you are having fire, it is okay to have excitement as long as you are not harming others. As a culture, we are so concerned and overwhelmed by what is happening in our past or what might happen in our future. What we are showing is just the opposite. The more you slow down, the less you do, but the more attention and presence you find in it, and then you will find the true meaning of life.

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