

Inner Strength Foundation by The Gratefulness Team

The Inner Strength Foundation (ISF) was established in 2014 to foster inner strength for outer stability in today's youth. ISF partners with schools in the Greater Philadelphia area to offer the twelve-week ISF Teen Program — the only school mindfulness program in Philadelphia developed specifically for high school students. Through age-appropriate lessons on cultural development, evolutionary biology, and neuroscience, students become budding archaeologists of themselves. Able to excavate layers of influence and vast cultural changes, adolescents learn the invaluable skill of being able to see their personal experience in a greater context.

ISF was created with an older age-group in mind — a group facing important life-decisions — to provide essential support and foster the insight, creativity, and emerging selfhood of adolescents. The program aims to provide aspiring youth from primarily at-risk communities with tools to self reflect, develop interpersonal skills, and gain perspective on how our culture and physiology affect us. Educator and ISF Founder/Executive Director Amy Edelstein shares more about how the program helps students discover pliability, resilience, and a renewed, grateful interest in life.

What sparked the founding of Inner Strength Foundation? How is ISF distinct from other school-based mindfulness programs?

In 2014, I moved to Philadelphia, the poorest of America's ten largest cities. I brought with me 35 years of in-depth contemplative practice. I wanted to see if there was a way to share the fruits of what I'd experienced more broadly and have a positive impact on the culture around me. The opportunity to work with teens came about somewhat serendipitously, and I found that it was perfect for a number of reasons. Teens are at that age where they are contemplating the purpose of their lives, what they want to do, what makes the world work. They are looking for answers. And they want to find those answers out on their own. Mindful awareness and contextual thinking gives teens tools to explore the world within and without, to discover how their minds work and what human consciousness is all about. It also directly supports them and helps them self-regulate, calm, decrease anxiety, and even work with the effects of trauma, which many of the population I work with have experienced. The great thing about teens is you can work with a large number over a short period of time. They are all in school, they all need supports, and they reinforce positive (as well as negative) habits together. Teaching teens tools they love to work with really supports them, empowers them, and brings them joy. They share this with their family and friends. I've even had teens, in a nice way, remind their teachers to take a deep breath, or put their stress in a bubble and let it float away. It's brought about some beautiful warmth and interactiveness into classrooms which all too often devolve into disciplinary forums rather than learning forums. We've seen an improvement in schoolwide culture, and as classroom and school culture improves, you start seeing improvement across broader areas of culture.

Teens meditating

The Inner Strength Foundation's teen program incorporates mindful awareness tools, and it is also far more than just exercises to de-stress and focus. Students learn how to see the world in a developmental perspective: They learn what 300 million years of evolutionary neuroscience means about their experience now. They learn how culture has changed over the last 600-800 years, moving into the period we call post-modernity, where we have greater individual choice, freedoms, and expressions but far less social support. This phenomenon impacts our experience in positive and negative ways. Understanding how the period of adolescent brain growth makes teens more moody or more inclined to take risks and how greater choice enables creative expression but can present an overwhelming plethora of options helps teens depersonalize their experience. They see a reason for why they feel what they feel. That understanding is fascinating to them, turning feelings of being overwhelmed into an attitude of curiosity. They really love to see large scale influences. Teaching teens systems and process thinking, I believe, is the best way to prepare them for a future we cannot imagine. It will help them navigate complexity and change, while being able to find their own center and stay aligned with their deeper values and higher aspirations.

How does ISF fill a need for the students it serves?

In our culture these days, we aren't really taught how to be with ourselves and each other in ways that are kind, supportive, and inspiring. Giving teens a way to be with themselves and each other that is not over-involved and that allows them to each "be in their own space" while being together helps counteract a lot of the loneliness and alienation that many adolescents feel.

Many teens also experience a lot of anxiety these days. Digital devices seems to have increased that, my guess is both because of the effect of technology on the brain and because there's less one-on-one direct social interaction. Helping them be with themselves, present with their breath, experiencing immediate sensations in the body provides a sense of groundedness. They are more able to enjoy life as it's happening.

Bodine High School for International Affairs, Philadelphia, PA

Of the 5,500 students Inner Strength has worked with since 2014, more than 85 percent come from families of poverty. In Philadelphia, that is defined as \$24,000/year for a family of four. When children come from an environment with such scarcity, there is often a residue of existential fear. Neighborhoods of poverty are harsh places to grow up, even if a child's family is warm and loving. Neighborhoods of poverty are places where there's a much higher incidence of gun violence; drug and alcohol addiction; homelessness; resource scarcity; and a basic lack of child-friendly, safe places for kids to play, green parks to enjoy nature, and wholesome food. Counteracting the effect of systemic, intergenerational poverty is a huge task. The mindful awareness, gratitude building, and love and kindness exercises we do as an integral part of the Inner Strength program bring love into these children's days. Their faces change. They calm down. They allow themselves to experience a little innocence again. And that makes a world of difference. Children should be safe and loved, and making our classrooms places where they can

experience that is an essential aspect of a wholesome and holistic education. We are training our children for life. That is more than learning facts and figures — it has to do with building character, aspiration, and a love of self, others, and life as a whole.

How do you see ISF as embodying/being related to grateful living?

The heart of Inner Strength Foundation is grateful living. Our values and orientation towards life are inseparable with that sense of love, wonder, and appreciation. We always think we should be grateful “for something” but grateful living is really an orientation or worldview. How do we see this miracle and mystery of life, even in the midst of sorrow and challenge? Do we marvel at the wonder of the human body, our capacity to breath, move, think? As much as we know about how we work, there is so much we don’t know and contemplating that brings a sense of gratitude. Inner Strength brings that sense into the high school classroom.

Teens at a meditation retreat at Pendle Hill, PA

Teens practice kindness towards themselves and others. They keep kindness logs to help them notice the small things that others do for them and that they do for others. Students are asked to notice one kind action someone does for them each day, simple things like waiting for them at the bus, picking up their pencil when they drop it, sharing food. Then they are asked to do one kind thing for someone each day.

Putting their attention on appreciation increases their experience of things to be grateful for. Mindfulness and contextual thinking are not simply abstract perspectives, they have to do with connecting us to ourselves, to each other, and to the vast world around us. That orientation is intrinsically connected to gentleness, connectedness, and care, which I believe are simply other ways to describe gratitude.

How does ISF inspire gratefulness and related actions?

One of the meditations that the students learn in the Inner Strength program is a Love and Kindness practice. They send good wishes to themselves and to others. They like leading this exercise the most, and they come up with the most beautiful wishes: “May you be confident.” “May you be safe.” “May you ace your exam.”

As mentioned before, we cultivate an awareness of kindness — the small things that people do for us each day — and we actually assign “homework” where students make a list of small ways they can be kind to others, and they practice them each week. Sometimes it’s the smallest things that can change a student’s experience from feeling sad and lonely to feeling appreciative and connected.

“Sometimes it’s the smallest things that can change a student’s experience from feeling sad and lonely to feeling appreciative and connected...”

Our focus is on potential, on the inherent goodness in everyone. While many of our students have experienced deep trauma, from losing a family member to gun violence, to

arriving in this country from a refugee camp in Cambodia, Thailand, or Nepal, to being raised in foster care, I've found that teens also have an irrepressible curiosity and desire to learn and grow. It's embedded in the period of adolescent brain growth — that desire to take risks, discover, feel no limitation. Inner Strength focuses on that, sensitive to the hurt students are processing, but bringing potential and possibility to the forefront of their awareness. This gives them a foundation to stand on as well as strengths to help them manage such challenging circumstances.

The stillness students experience in the meditations enable them to find peace and inner freedom, a spaciousness and acceptance that is uplifting and inspiring. That spaciousness changes the vantage point they are standing on as they look out at the world. It gives them a broader perspective. From that broader perspective they are able to see more options and possibilities for their lives. When students click into this way of seeing, the change is profound. It's like they put down a very heavy bookbag and stretch to embrace the world.

What inspires participation in ISF?

It is my hope that all high school students initially in Philadelphia will have access to this training at least once during their four years, and as we show improved outcomes, I look forward to other cities adopting these tools. Right now, schools need help with behavioral issues, mental health issues, focus issues. They look to Inner Strength to help support the hard work their teachers are doing, and they feel the difference. Kids have much more capacity than they show, and our hope is to give them tools to release that potential. One veteran teacher of 25 years saw one of her students use the mindfulness practices right before a challenging oral exam. This young man was smart but very insecure about his ability, he was an aspiring first-generation college student. He did the Breath and then Love & Kindness practices, telling himself, "You've got this" right before he walked into the exam, and the teacher said in all her years, she'd never seen a student respond with such authenticity, complexity, originality, ease, and confidence. When she described her student, she had tears in her eyes: It was like "he was speaking from a whole different part of himself," she said.

What is the lasting impact of ISF on the students it serves and the schools as a whole?

Syracuse University has been doing a multi-year research study on the effects of the program. What they have found consistently is that the teens who participate in the program show statistically significant improvement in self-regulation — being able to manage their feelings and stay on track for long-term goals. They also show improvement in self-compassion, such an important quality for adolescents.

What we see in the students and what teachers see is a subtle but unmistakable improvement in students' outlook on life, their ability to handle stress, and their enjoyment of school. There was one young man who had a hard time controlling his emotions. Through the mindfulness practice he realized how prone he was to get in fights, and he didn't want to do that anymore. He began to voluntarily eat his lunch in the principal's office so he'd stay calm and stay out of trouble. The principal credits his on-time graduation with his dedication to mindfulness he was learning. We see so many heartwarming changes. It's our hope that this culture will permeate each of the schools we are in, positively influencing all the classrooms.

What are some of the common barriers and obstacles that arise for participants? How are

they addressed?

Teens these days aren't used to being quiet. They are used to always having their earbuds in their ears, always being stimulated with sound and visuals. Being quiet can be quite a challenge for them, and unnerving sometimes. We take it slowly, always encouraging kids to explore the unfamiliarity of the quiet, without pressure or force. It generally takes about 4-6 weeks, and pretty much everyone settles in.

Some student have higher levels of anxiety or traumatic memories, and in these cases sometimes mindful awareness is not the right tool for them at this time. We carefully pay attention while the students are practicing, and if any show signs of anxiety we simply redirect them to other calming activities such as drawing or writing.

What inspires you personally about this work? What inspires you to continue growing this project?

There are so many elements that inspire me about this work that it's hard to isolate one or two aspects. For me, it just feels like a calling, like the right thing to be doing right now. There is so much support and encouragement, warm reception, and transformation in the people who are participating that I feel like the energy of the program is taking me rather than me directing it. Of course there is so much to do — systems to build, money to raise, program curriculums to develop, schools to form relationships with, teachers to support. I don't mean to say that I'm not deeply involved, but this work seems to have a life of its own. I've been interested in culture change at least since I was 17, when I consciously remember thinking about it and wanting to create a new community that fostered deeper values, and through its structures created an environment where everyone could flourish. This is an expression of that calling.

The changes I see in the students, with just 12 weeks of lessons, inspires me to grow this as widely as possible so as many young people as possible can have this support and touchstone during these formative years. Adolescence is a unique time, it goes fast, and those impressions often set a life direction. I hope I can guide as many kids as possible towards goodness, inspiration, and love.

How does gratefulness inspire you to make change in the world?

Gratefulness is the foundation of my work. I've had so much good fortune in my life. I've met some of the great role models of recent times: Nelson Mandela, Jane Goodall, the Dalai Lama. I've had the opportunity to study philosophy and meditation for decades and to travel to remote areas of the world where life looks really different than it does in a large American city. I feel so fortunate and want to share the inner riches I experience with as many people as possible. In Judaic philosophy, it is said our purpose is to bring the inner or hidden sparks of divinity to the forefront and light up the world. I can't imagine a more blessed or fulfilling life than doing that in any way that I can.

How does ISF plan to grow?

My current goal is to grow from reaching 2,000 students a year to reaching all of the students in Philadelphia once during their four years of high school. In the modeling I've done, we can scale to reach that many kids over five years, once we get the funding in place. Then we'll have a model that can be replicated in other cities.

If you could encapsulate one message for the students and schools who participate in ISF,

what would that be?

We all have something to be grateful for. We all have something to give. We all can practice kindness towards ourselves. Put your attention on these things. Cultivate your own experience of calm, curiosity, and care, and allow your heart to shine.

If ISF could share one message with the world about gratefulness, what would it be?

Gratefulness draws on the best of the human spirit in all of us. It renews and refreshes ourselves, and best of all it is contagious. The more grateful we are, the more we experience the richness of life and the more others around us do too. Sharing this message with the next generation, every way we can, gives them joy in the present and fuel for the future.

To read more about the inspiring projects and programs of Inner Strength Foundation, visit the website: innerstrengthfoundation.net