

# alternate Newsletter

Vol. 27 No. 1 – Spring 2016

## Leading Today, Challenging Tomorrow

Jeff Willis

For the past 25 years I have worked in the fields of outdoor experiential education, child and youth work, and leadership development. I truly believe children, youth and their families need to be seen, heard and believed no matter what the circumstances. They are visible, not invisible.

Ninety-nine percent of the kids I have met in my career have the potential to be the most incredible leaders of today and have the potential to change their tomorrow. However, it is our responsibility to first teach them how to lead themselves before

they can lead others. We need to teach them the life and social skills required to successfully explore their options and the ability to see the opportunities on their horizon. We need to give them a chance, and teach them to work hard for opportunities.

In 2003 I started working as a Youth and Family Worker at a Vancouver inner city school. Grandview/ḷuuqinak'uuh Elementary School taught me many things about what works and does not work in education and Child and Youth Work, especially *...continued on page 3*

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Greetings from Leanne Haggland, the newsletter editor!

As always, this issue contains several thought-provoking articles related to alternate education.

Our feature story, written by Jeff Willis, explores the benefits of his outdoor education programming for youth.

The second article, written by Jenn MacDonald, provides in-depth analysis of the integrative programming offered at Mountainside Alternative School in North Vancouver.

Our third article, written by Jim Lawson, celebrates thirty years in alternate education, and offers a personal account of his highly successful Introduction to Building Trades program in Port Alberni.

The final article, written by Dr. Dzung Vo, an Adolescent Medicine Specialist at BC Children's Hospital, examines mindfulness for teens and whether or not mindfulness is religious.

The newsletter also contains information about the winners of the BCAEA student awards and photos from this year's conference held in February.

We are constantly on the search for thought-provoking articles to include in upcoming issues. Talk to me, or Liz Louwersheimer, who will be taking over as the newsletter editor, beginning July 1st, by emailing either of us at [editor@bcaea.com](mailto:editor@bcaea.com)

I will continue to serve the association in my new role as Vice President, and wish everyone happy summer holidays!

*L Haggland*

# President's Message

Mike Shaw



As the old saying goes, the only thing constant is change itself, and lately in education, truer words were never spoken! Next September will usher in the pilot year for the new curriculum we must teach in the senior grades, and the content hasn't even been finalized yet by the Ministry of Education.

I have taught in alternate now for 25 years (best job ever!), and although curriculum changes did happen in the past, there was a more measured and thoughtful approach taken then. Courses were phased in over a number of years. For instance, I clearly remember how Science was redone, with each new grade level added sequentially so that over a few years everyone was on the new curriculum. This allowed teachers time to become acquainted with the new content, and just as importantly, allowed publishers to produce resources that matched the new learning outcomes. It was work, but manageable.

Instead, what we have now is rushed and half baked, leaving little or no time for teachers to put together meaningful course work for their students. And publishers don't have enough time to produce resources for teachers to use. In my daily classroom life, I have kids working

on Grades 9-12, including many on an Adult Graduation path. As a teacher who specializes in being a generalist, I currently have more than thirty courses that I am expected to deliver to my kids. It isn't physically possible to make the necessary changes to all those courses to match the new curriculum when it ultimately gets finalized. I am sure many of you are in the same boat.

So what then? Do you reduce the number of courses you offer to your kids to a more manageable number? Do you quit offering some courses altogether? Either is a poor choice for the students in your care, as it ultimately impacts their education. I know for me, I will focus on the core courses and make changes to the others as time permits. And that is assuming the new curriculum comes out of draft soon.

Ultimately, each of us can only do what is humanly possible, and we have to take care of ourselves first or we won't be able to take care of our kids. So pace yourselves. Rest and relax this summer in the company of friends and family. Have fun, recharge, and be raring to go in September. There are many kids out there who need you more than ever. ♦

# Leading Today

*[continued from page 1]*

for a community that has been under served, disrespected, mistreated and misunderstood for decades.

First off, I learned that most of the parents and students I worked with were incredibly humble, sincere and strong. I saw firsthand how they were marginalized by society but were more real and authentic than the average Canadian. It was clear that they were tough on the outside and vulnerable on the inside. Secondly, kids will only learn and change for the better if we remind them everyday they matter and they belong. Thirdly, all the work we do needs to focus on their strengths rather than their deficits.

What doesn't work in education is when teachers and support staff are not willing or unable to give 100% for their students. Their responsibility is to be fully committed to helping students become the best they can be as young people and as learners. Would you settle for someone only giving you 50% of their time or effort? Why would we give only 50% to our students?

I learned that in a time of crisis, blaming the parent(s), the "system," or even the student will get you nowhere. It is about getting to solutions rather pointing fingers and creating a

better space and place and/or at least getting a plan in place that everyone will rally around. One of the most important things I learned in my career is that you cannot take the role of saving or parenting a student.

Our job is to go beyond teaching the ABC's and 123's. We mentor. We listen. We guide. We make an impact on our student's strengths and potential.

I learned more on the frontline than I did at post secondary school. I learned more from my students and their parents than I did from my professors. The work I witnessed from other educators, administrators and youth workers—whose professional conviction and determination to make a positive impact on their students was astounding—has stayed with me throughout my career.

As an educator you place more limits on yourself than anyone else around you. I was taught to balance boldness and *...continued on page 19*



*A focus on creating a welcoming community where students feel a sense of belonging*



# Owning Your Journey

Jenn MacDonald

“  
Out  
of these  
rich conver-  
sations we  
developed  
our school  
mission

”

Mountainside is a supportive educational community committed to providing students with opportunities for individualized, innovative, and transferable learning experiences that encourage the development of the whole student

Since the opening of Mountainside in 2012, we have encouraged students to internalize our school motto - Own Your Journey - in order to take personal responsibility for their personal pathways to graduation. Staff have also been encouraged to own their own journeys as life-long learners, and in that spirit, we have challenged ourselves to continue to provide meaningful learning opportunities for our very diverse learners.

One year ago, our staff sat down together, and over a series of discussions, developed the school motto, which is designed to provide a direction for staff and community partners to enable students to own their journeys. We discussed many elements that we believe constitute a meaningful and successful learning experience for all youth - not just 'alternate' or 'at-risk' youth. Out of these rich conversations we developed our school mission, with a focus on creating a welcoming community where students feel a sense of belonging. Within that community, we aim to provide "individualized, innovative and transfer-

able learning experiences" in order to help each student own his or her own educational journey to graduation. Below are highlights of some of the many programs we offer in our ongoing effort to live our mission statement through our daily practices.

## Individualized Learning Experience: The Self-Efficacy Passport

At Mountainside we believe that in order to learn, students need to believe in themselves and maximize their individual strengths. The North Vancouver School District offers the board-authorized courses Self Efficacy 10 - 12, and in October 2015, we piloted the Self-Efficacy Passport program. Students were given a passport designed to help them set academic and social/emotional goals, track involvement in school activities, and reflect upon their personal progress. Every two weeks, everyone in the school stops what they are doing in or-



der to update their passports. These updates may involve logging Daily Physical Activity or Extra-curricular activity hours, or may consist of more in-depth academic goal-setting. Our end goal is to help students develop their belief in themselves, while at the same time, take ownership of the steps they are taking toward graduation. 'Passport time' also creates a common language around goal-setting and self-efficacy in the school. Through the passport we celebrate student success and reframe goals not met as opportunities to re-develop or refine targets as necessary. At Mountainside we believe in focusing on strengths rather than what needs to be improved, and try to model this approach through the school passport.

**Innovative Learning Experience: Filmglish**

At Mountainside we are committed to providing innovative course offerings that provide opportunities for integrated, flexible, and concept-based learning in keeping with BC's current curriculum redesign. The Filmglish class is a semester-long integration of English 10-12 and Film and Television 11-12. Students learn different filmmaking and story-telling techniques, and create films based around their own interests using the concepts learned in class. The course culminates with a film-festival where students can screen their films for the entire school. Over the course of this year, students have created movie trailers, short films and documentaries based around the theme of 'connection.'

Through Filmglish students are given opportunities for self-directed projects, ownership, and



passion-based learning. They will also develop transferable life skills such as problem solving, creativity, collaboration, and self-efficacy through their participation in the course. In this way the hope is that students who are at-risk to not graduate will earn important credits toward the graduation program and increase their self-efficacy, which will in turn increase motivation to continue to work towards graduation. Filmglish is already establishing itself as a popular option at Mountainside; we're excited to see the course, and the students who take it, continue to grow.

*...continued on page 11*



*We are committed to providing innovative course offerings*



## \$1000 Student Bursary Winners

The top choice in our recent membership survey on how to deal with our budget surplus was to increase the amount of the awards we distribute each year. Thanks for making your voice heard if you took the time to respond. As a consequence of your feedback, we raised the value of each bursary to \$1000, double the previous amount. All five winners below have done well in their alternate program, and have decided to go on to further post-secondary education or training. We wish them well, and admire them for being the positive role models they are. Congratulations!



### **Imaan Begg**

Imaan is a first year student at CAFE Secondary School. Imaan is actively involved in both the school and her local community where she has a special interest in working with children.



### **Connor MacDonald**

Connor is a student at the Individual Learning Centre in Victoria. He has an easy-going, clever nature, and produces high quality school work. Connor will be successful in whatever field he chooses to pursue.



### **Anitra Sarcevic**

Anitra has attended the Sea to Sky Alternative School for the last 5 years and has completed a variety of amazing projects, including three short films. She is currently supporting herself working part-time in Squamish and will be attending Kwantlen University in September.



**Shandrea Wall**

Shandrea is a student at the Individual Learning Centre in Victoria. She has worked incredibly hard to catch up in core subject areas and extra-curricular events. She is now on track to dip her toes into the post-secondary world in September.



**Leah Williams**

Leah is a grade 12 student in the Advantage Program at Highland Secondary who is set to attend North Island College to study psychology in the fall. She is a true survivor and mature well beyond her years. She is curious, reflective and insightful.

## *Student Activity Grants*

**Cowichan Valley Open Learning Cooperative - \$1400**

Awarded to help with the cost of outfitting a recording studio for their music program. Program teacher, Justin Croswell believes the studio will benefit the students' musical development and confidence. We are looking forward to featuring this program in an upcoming newsletter.

**Phoenix Place Program, Gulf Island Secondary School - \$1000**

Awarded to help fund their year end field trip to the Juan de Fuca Trail. Kristi Kallip, the program teacher, is eager to publish an article detailing the week long adventure. Look for it in an upcoming issue of the newsletter as well.

# \$200 Student Achievement Award Winners

After feedback from our members, we also increased the amount of the Student Achievement Awards we offer each year, doubling that award amount too. Each of the winners that follow have made significant, positive changes in their lives and academic career since enrolling in an alternate program. Along with their teachers and peers, we are pleased to recognize that development by awarding them each a \$200 Student Achievement Award, disbursed as a gift certificate to a store chosen jointly with their sponsor teacher.



## **Lauren Abernathy**

Lauren is a student at the Individual Learning Centre in Victoria, where her attendance and school work are excellent. Lauren plans to work in the health profession, pursue writing and music.



## **Harley Brown**

Harley is a grade 9 student in the Advantage Program at Highland Secondary School. He has made a strong commitment to attend regularly and do well in his courses. He is eager to help in the kitchen and recycling program.



## **Kylee Hansen**

Kylee is a mature, curious and hardworking Grade 11 student, enrolled in the Advantage Program at Highland Secondary. She is very creative and artistic. Her intuition and intellect will be put to use after high school in a helping profession, likely nursing.



## **Isabel Hulbert**

Isabel is a first year as a student at CAFE. She is a dedicated reader and talented writer who enjoys spending her free time in the outdoors. She volunteers at a local elementary school to help students learn to read.





**Christian Hurst**

Christian attends CAFE Secondary School in Coquitlam. He is involved in the school leadership program, mentoring students at the local elementary school. He is a very talented artist who has great passion and knowledge of world history.



**Catalina Joseph**

Catalina is a full-time student at CAFE Secondary School, in the Young Parent Program. She is a single mother to a 9 months old daughter. Catalina is passionate about pursuing a career as a Youth Worker in the near future.



**Erin Libera**

Erin has been a student at Individual Learning Centre in Victoria for the past 2 years. She attends school daily and is well on her way to completing the necessary pre-requisites to enter the HCA Program at Camosun College this fall.



**Rachel Paton**

Rachel is a student at Individual Learning Centre in Victoria. She looks forward to graduating and studying to become an artist.



**Tomas Peppard**

Tomas is a diligent student at the Individual Learning Centre in Victoria and an active participant in the school community, routinely engaging in extra-curricular activities. Tomas is passionate about music and has not yet pinned down a career path or post-secondary route.



**Cole Phillips**

Cole is a grade 10 student in the Advantage Program at Highland Secondary in Co-mox. He is athletic and musical, participating in both the school hockey academy and senior band. He has gained self-confidence over his three years in this school program. He now walks tall and dreams big.

## \$200 Student Achievement Award Winners Continued



### **Brittany Reddecliff**

Brittany attends CAFE Secondary School in Coquitlam and has worked hard to catch up in her academics. She is very excited about her upcoming graduation in June. She is looking forward to a career in Cosmetology.



### **Molly Reid**

Molly has been a successful attendee at the Individual Learning Centre in Victoria for the last 2 years. Her creative spark and attention to detail has set her apart.



### **Taylor Schwab**

Taylor is a student at CAFE Secondary School in Coquitlam. She plans to enroll in September at Douglas College in Criminology in order to become a youth worker to help kids overcome challenges.



### **Avalon Scott**

Avalon attends CAFE Secondary School in Coquitlam, and is a member of the school leadership team and outdoor education program. Avalon is interested in sustainable practices and environmental awareness. She looks forward to completing this year and graduating next year.



### **Jasmine Sharp**

Jasmine is a student at the Individual Learning Centre in Victoria. She has proven herself to be strong, resilient, creative and empathetic. She is excelling academically and is taking advantage of extra-curricular opportunities.

# Owning Your Journey

*(continued from page 5)*

## **Transferable Learning Experience: Pipefitters Program**

*“Giving young people in North Vancouver exposure to a wide variety of career options while still in school is one way the BC government can help ensure students find their fit in our diverse and strong economy. Squamish nation, Kwantlen Polytechnic University, MSS are all working hard to make it easier for students and parents to explore careers.”*

*Naomi Yamamoto, Minister of State for Tourism and Small Business, MLA North Vancouver – Lonsdale*

As a staff we recognize the importance of helping our students develop skills that will aid them in the transition from school to work. Students from Mountainside Secondary are getting a head start in hands-on trades training at the Squamish Nation Trade Centre through a new Accelerated Credit Enrolment in Industry Training program (ACE IT) Piping Foundation program. This program was made possible through a B.C.’s Skills for Jobs Blueprint partnership involving the Squamish First Nation, the Industry Training Authority, Kwantlen Polytechnic University, North Vancouver School district

and the private sector. ACE IT allows students to take their first level of technical training in certain trades while at the same time giving them high school credits needed for graduation. In 2015, 17 Mountainside students completed the program, and this June, 20 more students will add to their numbers.

As our program continues to grow and expand, we at Mountainside hope to be able to continue to provide the most engaging individualized, innovative and transferable learning experiences possible. The school has evolved into a vibrant community over the past four years; we are excited to see where the next four years will take us! ♦

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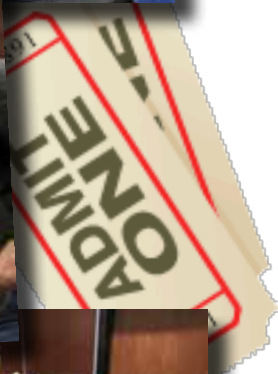
**Jenn MacDonald** *has been the teacher in the Therapeutic Day Program at Mountainside since the school opened in 2012. She has worked in alternate education for the past 14 years. In her free time, she enjoys reading author bios in educational newsletters.*



# 29th Challenge & Change Conference

Wasn't the Schmooze wonderful? Once more, Chef Lori Pilling and her crew from Delta Secondary did a fantastic job creating the vast array of goodies you see in the photos below. The food truly was to die for! And Karen Gadowsky did her usual incredible job lining up a terrific keynote and a wide variety of speakers. February 16-17, 2017 is our 30th anniversary, and we have lots of great things in store for you, including Will Richardson as keynote, so be sure to make plans to attend. You won't be disappointed, but we certainly will be if you don't come! ♦





# Is Mindfulness Religious?

Dzung X. Vo, MD, FAAP

“  
Even the  
Buddha  
wasn't a  
Buddhist



There has been a lot of discussion lately in mindfulness in education circles about the need for mindfulness programs in educational contexts to be completely secular. This is in the face of recent legal challenges to some mindfulness programs in schools, on the grounds that these programs are a type of covert religious indoctrination to Buddhism. One consideration, especially in the US public schools context, is the need for separation of church and state. Here are some of my brief reflections on this very complex question, from my experience as a mindfulness practitioner in a Buddhist tradition, and as a pediatrician who teaches secular mindfulness in health care settings.



**You absolutely do not need to be a Buddhist to practice mindfulness.**

Jon Kabat-Zinn is fond of saying, “Even the Buddha wasn't a Buddhist.” My own mindfulness teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh, has encouraged the development of skillful and culturally appropriate ways to offer mindfulness in non-religious ways. Although Thich Nhat Hanh is a Buddhist monk, his Buddhism is inclusive and non-evangelical. At his practice centers I have met people of all religious backgrounds, including catholic priests and nuns. Thich Nhat Hanh never tries to convert people to Buddhism, and in fact, encourages people to [re-]connect deeply with their own spiritual and religious traditions, and renew them. He once said, “If I had to choose between Buddhism and peace, I would choose peace.”

In my medical practice, I strive to offer mindfulness in a secular way that is accessible to people of any religion, because I hope that the practice may benefit anybody, and I don't want religion to be a barrier.

**At the same time, mindfulness comes from somewhere, it's not new, it has a history. How can we offer mindfulness in secular ways, while at the same time acknowledging and respecting the roots?**

Ignoring the peoples, histories, and cultures that have contributed to mindfulness as we know it today, risks cultural appropriation. In striving to present mindfulness in a purely secular way that, there is the risk of [further] marginalizing the peoples and cultures that have contributed so much to this gift to humanity through many generations. By erasing that history, it can leave the impression [even if only by omission] that mindfulness is somehow a “new” invention, or a Western creation. For me, this risks a type of cultural colonization – taking something beautiful without giving credit. This needs to be considered in a larger, complex context of historical colonial legacies, imbalances of power, and privilege. My friend Susanna Barkataki has explored this issue much more eloquently than I can.

**For me personally, I feel the need to respect my teacher and my lineage.**

As a second-generation Vietnamese American, I was introduced to mindfulness and meditation through my Buddhist family. Later, as a young adult, I studied mindfulness with Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh. My first mindfulness retreat with Thich Nhat Hanh [in 1999] was a life-changing and heart-opening experience for me. It allowed me to experience how mindfulness could more than an idea or philosophy, but a way of life and a concrete practice. That experience has formed the foundation for my life and work ever since.

In addition, as an immigrant adolescent and person of color growing up in the United States, I experienced a lot of suffering from internalized racism and identity confusion. Re-connecting with my cultural roots through mindfulness has been an important part of my healing journey.

When I wrote *The Mindful Teen*, I explicitly offered acknowledgement and gratitude to my family and my teachers for helping me on my own path of mindfulness practice. To not mention them would have felt disrespectful, as if I had “invented” mindfulness somehow – when in reality all I’ve done is adapt and offer the practices that I’ve learned from others, within a specific context of adolescent health.

**Just because something has religious influences, doesn’t mean that we can’t all learn from it in a secular context.**

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is one of the most revered leaders for social justice in the US and worldwide. His work was deeply influenced and rooted in his Christian theology. I myself am not a Christian and I have no interest in converting to Christianity. Does this mean that I should not

admire and be inspired by Dr. King’s work? Similarly, does this mean that Dr. King’s teachings should not be taught, celebrated, and practiced in secular settings such as US public schools? If so, then would that also imply that the Dr. King US federal holiday is unconstitutional?

For me, the question of whether any particular mindfulness teaching or practice is “religious” or “secular” has less to do with the historical influences that inform that particular practice [e.g. Buddhism, yoga etc], and more to do with the specific language, content, and context in which it is presented. Religious and wisdom traditions throughout the world have much beauty and wisdom to offer us. *...continued on page 18*



*Does this mean that Dr. King’s teachings should not be taught?*



# VAST Experience: 30 Years in Alternate

*Jim Lawson*

“  
  
*The students have had the opportunity to try out the world of construction*”

The past seven years have been the proudest and most enjoyable years of my 30-year career as an Alternative Education Teacher. With the support of the VAST Alternative Education administrative team and the partnership we have with BC Hydro, the students of School District 70 have had the opportunity to try out the world of construction [tool belts and all] while providing a very valuable service to their community.

For the past seven years, we have been granted [rent free] exclusive use of a decommissioned BC Hydro operations building in Port Alberni in exchange for caretaker services at the building. Financial support from the district, used to purchase tools and equipment, allowed me to offer a very comprehensive woodworking/construction program to the Alternative Education students.

With over 3000 square feet of shop space and an invitation from SD70 to develop a personalized, hands on, Introduction to the Building Trades program, I was able to offer the students of the Vast Education Centre the chance to participate in the construction of a variety of substantial wooden structures while earning grad credits.

The students have built dog houses, chicken coops, garden sheds and playhouses, along with a variety of smaller projects, to exacting specifications while exhibiting exemplary craftsmanship.

Many of the structures were built for local citizens for the cost of materials and a small fee to help cover the cost of maintaining the shop's tools and equipment. Having a customer to satisfy gave me the occasion to emphasize the importance of quality workmanship, as in "Perfect is close enough." and also gave me the opportunity to underscore how essential it is to follow directions carefully in order to produce exactly what the customer ordered.

Our proudest moments came about when the customers for the structures we built were charitable organizations and service clubs that benefited tremendously from our efforts, our skills and our products. The students have built a raffle ticket sales kiosk for the local Rotary Club, a chicken coop and an ornate storage shed for the local Palliative Care Home to auction off at their annual fundraising gala, dog houses for the SPCA and most recently, a playhouse for the Alberni Valley Childcare Society which they will now raffle off to help fund a new bus.







students to a new and exciting activity. Another benefit of this activity is when every one of those satisfied elementary students becomes an ambassador for the Alt. Ed. Program as they brag about what they built with their “Big Buddies” from the Alternative School. And inevitably, when we debrief after the elementary students have left the shop, one of my Alt. Ed. students will tell me that he or she had a child in their group that “just wouldn’t

The highlight of every project completion is seeing the expressions of pride on the faces of the students on “presentation day” when the customers, assembled dignitaries and the student’s own family and friends attend a “Roll Out” ceremony and congratulate them on their accomplishments. It almost makes you forget that the primary intent of the course was to introduce students to the skills and knowledge they need to determine if construction is a career path for them.

In partnership with our local elementary schools, I have also been able to offer a “Mentorship/Leadership” Program to our VAST students. Every school year, we schedule all of SD70’s Grade 4/5 and Grade 5 classes in the shop for 4½ hours of shop time where they construct a birdhouse, a planter box or something similar, under the guidance and mentorship of the senior students from the Vast Alternative Education shop class. Teaching someone else always reinforces the senior students’ own learning while introducing the elementary

listen.” “Hmmm?” I always respond, “I wonder what that’s like?”

I am retiring at the end of this school year and I, like many of you I’m sure, will miss those many gratifying moments, like witnessing student successes and seeing the pride that comes from embracing opportunities, setting goals and then working hard enough to make them a reality.

The work we all do is so very important. Our students matter and they need us to teach to their needs while understanding the complications in their lives that stand in the way of them doing their education like the “others” do. The rewards we gather and witness are often awe-inspiring and good for both the student and their teacher. ♦

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**Jim Lawson** has worked in alternate education in Port Alberni for thirty years. He is retiring in June after a long and successful career, but will continue to volunteer his time with the BCAEA Executive.



*I always respond, “I wonder what that’s like?”*



# Mindfulness

[continued from page 15]



If we cannot find skillful, culturally appropriate, and inclusive ways to learn from them without threatening the church/state separation, then we will all be poorer for it in my opinion.

devout Christians, Muslims, Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, and more. When I am inviting a youth to join our mindfulness programs, I say something like this:

*Mindfulness isn't new, and I didn't invent it*

**There's no ignoring the "Elephant in the room."**

A thirty-second Google search of "mindfulness" will reveal many links with Buddhism. To not mention it is to ignore the elephant in the room, and risks inadvertently furthering the impression that mindfulness programs have "something to hide." In my experience, it's more useful to address the question head on, in an inclusive and respectful way.

*"Mindfulness isn't new, and I didn't invent it. It is thousands of years old, and has roots in traditions from Asia, like Buddhism and yoga. That said, you definitely don't need to be a Buddhist to practice mindfulness. Mindfulness is about cultivating a present-moment, open-hearted awareness and compassion. That kind of awareness is found in wisdom traditions throughout the world, whether or not they call it 'mindfulness.' The mindfulness that we teach here is for anyone of any religion, or no religion at all. That's because we're not going to ask you to believe anything, or to not believe anything. Instead, we're just going to invite you to pay attention, and learn from your own experience."*



**We can practice mindful communication with critics of mindfulness.**

Criticisms and attacks on mindfulness in schools usually comes from a place of love for children, a desire to protect them from perceived harm, as well as possibly, a deeper suffering, anxiety, or fear. There may also be valid criticisms and cautions which we in the mindfulness community can learn from. Can we listen with an open heart, without getting defensive? Can we embody humility and unconditional love in the way that we respond? Ultimately, our own mindful and compassionate presence (including, and perhaps especially, with critics of mindfulness) is the best ambassador for bringing mindfulness into society, more so than anything we can say, or any arguments that we can make.

To this day, to my knowledge, I have not had any youth or family decline or object to mindfulness on religious grounds. ♦

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**Dzung X. Vo, MD, FAAP** is a Clinical Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Medicine at UBC and the Director, Adolescent Medicine Fellowship Program. BC Children's Hospital. Visit the website: [mindfulnessforteens.com](http://mindfulnessforteens.com)

**Putting it all together**

I work with a very diverse, multicultural population, including Canadian Indigenous peoples,

# Leading Today

*(continued from page 3)*



and a relationship sprung between both schools. Then I figured I would start taking students on one to three week outdoor leadership expeditions called Fireside. Ten years later, in partnership with community organizations, individuals and schools, Fireside Adventures continues to support many children and youth who do not have funding to access summer programs.

gentleness, moving quickly but quietly and being strategic yet flexible. Be effective and deliberate.

The call of the wild, or as educators say, “the outside classroom,” came hammering down on me one day when a group of my students disclosed they had never climbed a mountain, swum in the ocean, slept in a tent or paddled a canoe. I was taken aback that my students had no experience, knowledge or ability to access outdoor recreation. They also expressed that they probably would not become anything in life. I felt all the work I was doing in the school was down the pipe.

I got irritated that my students were disconnected with their potential, struggled to appreciate the “awe” of nature and suffered from a lack of self worth. I impulsively decided I was going to start a summer leadership camp. First I started with an experiential-based day program mixing my inner city students with nearby private school kids. The idea took off

Some of the students who participated in the earlier programs, most of whom were not expected to complete secondary school, have defied those expectations and have graduated. Now they are in a position to hold up their end of an agreement I made and continue to make with each camper: give back. Through this experience, these kids inspire not only me, but also other kids going through similar struggles and who need to consciously make and follow through on important life choices. The success of Fireside and Grandview is credited to the parents who trusted and believed in us. It goes to students who took a chance and opened themselves up. It goes to my co-workers who supported me and others at Fireside. The story continues.

From Fireside, I decided I wanted to do something that I could never do during my time at Grandview - create an Aboriginal youth leadership program that really impacted urban First Nations youth.

*...continued on page 20*



*I got irritated that my students were disconnected with their potential*



## Leading Today

[continued from page 19]

Three years ago the Surrey School District took a chance and funded a program I designed. Windspeaker is an experiential and cultural based outdoor leadership program, offering after school workshops, weekend field trips, retreats, and March break and summer expeditions for Surrey Aboriginal students. We started with just 15 apprehensive students and now we are at 60 youth and a waiting list. All students are in school

and have committed to being a leader to change their own tomorrow by promising to move onto post secondary besides showing up for planned outings or training sessions—the commitment they make to stay in the program.



We have the best job in the world and it is a privilege to serve and teach our students. ♦

**Jeff Willis** is the founder of Creative Toolbox, Fire-side Adventures and VOS

## Contact

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