

The Niroga Institute

Innovation 2015

Our program is innovative in the following ways:

- **Evidence-based:** Latest research in neuroscience, trauma, and somatic psychology, highlight the brain-behavior connection and validate the potential of dynamic mindfulness as a powerful skill-set for personal transformation and optimal leadership. Renowned neuroscientist Prof. Ritchie Davidson says, “Mindfulness is essential mental training to prepare our children and youth for the 21st century.” Additionally, there is robust independent research demonstrating the efficacy of TLS for high-risk youth.
- **Mindful Mentoring:** There is plenty of research demonstrating that mentoring programs have a profound, lasting impact on life trajectories. Our approach adds a unique component to traditional mentoring programs, where mentors are steeped in dynamic mindfulness practice and help mentees develop and sustain transformative life/leadership skills.
- **Youth-initiated Peer Leadership and Pay-forward Model:** This program proposes to develop and deploy youth as leaders, prepared to shape our future and break the cycle of generational dysfunction in our communities. Conceived by youth whose lives were changed by TLS, this program was designed and enacted by them for their peers most susceptible to school failure, juvenile delinquency and career criminality. Using a “pay-forward” model, youth leaders will be equipped with tools that they can give back to their communities.

Every week, Niroga Institute brings Transformative Life/Leadership Skills (TLS) to hundreds of youth at high risk of school failure and juvenile delinquency, in schools, alternative schools, juvenile halls and jails. TLS is a dynamic mindfulness practice integrating yoga, breathing techniques and meditation, that is evidence-based and trauma-informed, validated by the latest findings in neuroscience, trauma research and somatic psychology. Independent researchers have shown that TLS enhances stress resilience and emotion regulation – key catalysts for positive youth development and human effectiveness. Our target population is older youth (ages 16-24), primarily of color from underserved communities, likely to enter the School-to-Prison Pipeline.

Two years ago Niroga started a Peer Leadership program at Street Academy, an alternative high school in Oakland, with youth receiving academic credit for participation. A few selected Peer Leaders became steering committee members of our Youth Advisory Council (YAC), chartered to design, develop and deliver programs by and for youth. One of the YAC recommendations was a Mindful Mentoring program, which we launched last year, with 15 mentors and 15 mentees. This program has received an overwhelmingly positive response from the youth and the adults around them, helping these high-risk youth stay in school and out of trouble. In fact, peer leaders have presented TLS to multiple middle and high schools throughout Oakland Unified School District (OUSD). We propose to build on the success of this pilot program to bring Mindful Mentoring and community-based Peer Leadership together, and develop a model that can be scalable, replicable and sustainable.

The proposed program will take place over a year for youth between the ages of 16 and 24, with two components:

- **Mindful Mentoring (MM):** Up to 25 youth will be matched with peer-leader mentors helping them develop and deepen dynamic mindfulness practice. In addition to a monthly three-hour immersion for all mentors and mentees, mentors will meet weekly with mentees individually, ensuring adequate psychosocial support.
- **Peer Leadership (PL):** After 6 months, the youth in the MM program will transition into the PL program, while the next cohort begins MM. In addition to developing leadership skills, Peer Leaders will commit to mentoring the next cohort of mentees, becoming neighborhood change-agents in a pay-forward model of community capacity building.

Given two cohorts of 25 youth going through MM and PL back-to-back, this program will serve 50 high-risk youth intensively over the course of a full year.

The Mindful Mentoring component of this proposal is an intensive six-month program for designed to empower youth to connect with their inner strength and begin to address some of the key challenges facing the Bay Area, including violence reduction, improved graduation rates, bullying prevention, discrimination and intolerance. Through community gatherings, field trips, and a connection with a caring adult who is either a yoga teacher or long-term mindfulness practitioner, youth learn about the effects of stress and trauma on the mind and body. Grounded in principles of mindfulness, meditation and yoga, these activities enable participants to learn concrete skills to increase self-awareness, lower stress, and begin to lay the foundation of internal and external change. In addition, using restorative justice practices such as the circle process, youth engage in meaningful intergenerational conversations about how stress and trauma affect our relationships and communities, with the objective of gaining a renewed understanding of how mindfulness and personal transformation can help advance our collective wellbeing.

The Peer Leadership component of program takes the youth who have participated in Mindful Mentoring deeper, facilitating their mastery of dynamic mindfulness, building leadership capacity and preparing them to serve in their communities. Throughout the program the youth receive continued support to develop their consistent mindfulness/TLS practice along with bi-monthly, hour-long group sessions with a Niroga TLS trainer. In these sessions and the assignments between them, participants systematically explore the four domains of TLS: stress management, self-awareness, emotion regulation, and healthy relationships. Using experiential exercises, group dialogue and guided self-reflection, the session help youth develop self-mastery to become leaders in their own lives in their communities. The program culminates with the youth completing a self-designed service project in their community and facilitating COMBO (COMMunity Mind-Body) meetings (hour-long introduction to mindfulness/TLS meeting for the community).

Specifically, the Peer Leadership program intends to fulfill the following goals:

- Help youth to maintain a personal TLS practice: Youth will commit to develop a 15-minute TLS practice and will attend an hour-long youth yoga class, each 2 times per week. They will also keep a journal to reflect on, and document, how their practice evolves. In addition, they will develop a brief daily TLS practice, and teach it to someone at home.
- Facilitate an understanding of the benefits of TLS: Youth will research evidence for the benefits of TLS/mindfulness/yoga and present their findings to the group. They will also keep track of and regularly share their own experiences with TLS.
- Prepare and oversee participants' facilitation of TLS for their peers: Youth will learn how to teach TLS to others, plan and deliver TLS sessions to one of their peer-groups, and report back about their experience.
- Prepare participants to lead and facilitate COMBO (COMMunity Mind-Body) meetings for the community: With the support of the Niroga trainer, youth will facilitate COMBO meetings for (1) the students at their school, (2) parents and families, and (3) participants at a community center.

After participating in this program, the youth will have opportunities to be on Niroga's Youth Advisory Counsel, serve as a mentor for another youth, and/or participate in yoga teacher training. Having experienced their capacity for leadership and self-determination, we believe that each of the participants will graduate and perform better in school, and will be prepared to lead healthy, productive lives.

A million youth are entering the School-to-Prison Pipeline every year. They are mostly youth of color coming from low-income communities. Not only is this a colossal waste of human potential, but this also costs us hundreds of billions of dollars every year. These youth have disproportionately higher stress, traumatic stress and post-traumatic stress, and many have not experienced secure attachment with compassionate adults in their lives who can help them reach their highest potential. This innovative program addresses both these critical needs: life skills for building stress resilience, and adult mentors established in dynamic mindfulness practices.

The program cost to RMYF is \$25,000, serving 50 youth intensively. The societal cost of a high-school dropout has been estimated at \$260,000 (Cecilia Rouse, Princeton University, 2005). If this program helps keep only one disadvantaged youth (2% of 50 served) in school and out of trouble, the Return-on-Investment will be over 5-fold or 500%!

In reality, all of our participants will benefit from substantial mentorship, learn dynamic mindfulness practices to support their own stress management and healing from trauma, and become leaders in their own right, able to share the transformative life skills that they learn with youth in their communities.