



THIS FALL, DERBY WELCOMED WILL SLOTNICK, A LEADER IN STRESS MANAGEMENT AND MINDFULNESS TRAINING, FOR WELLNESS COLLABORATION WEEK.

Will Slotnick is the founder and director of Wellness Collaborative, an organization dedicated to promoting health and preventing addiction in school communities. He has worked as a substance-abuse prevention and wellness specialist for more than 25 years, providing drug education, stress management, and mindfulness training to schools. He has worked with Derby for the past ten years.

Over the course of a four-day stress-management-based drug and alcohol awareness program, Slotnick led small workshops with Grade 7 and 8 students in meditation, mindfulness, and self-awareness—an innovative approach to identify and manage stressors before they create destructive behavior. An important step, Slotnick says, is acknowledging that today most kids do not abuse alcohol and drugs. While the drug epidemic seemed to affect older generations of students, alcohol abuse is at a historic low. What has been trending upward for years, however, is kids struggling with anxiety, stress, and worry.

“By the time students are in the Upper School, their decision-making is more driven by the psychological and social influences in their lives, and less by whether it’s good or bad, or right or wrong,” Slotnick says. “We’re addressing those underlying causes and thoughts.”

Slotnick says a culprit of our current challenges was the reaction to ’90s culture and a belief that kids had too much free time, and that free time led to trouble. Studies were even conducted showing most kids were likely to get into trouble after 2:30 p.m., when they lacked the supervision of adults. What began was a movement to structure every minute of a child’s schedule to avoid substance abuse. It worked, but what developed were kids who were over-

involved and stressed. Everybody had to do everything, and activities that once promoted stress relief and meaningful relationships seemed to dwindle. In a post-9/11 world experiencing an economic downturn, a culture of fear emerged. Kids began to adopt parent fears, and soon fifth graders began to worry about their own safety and their futures. “Did I choose the right secondary school?” “Where will I go to college?” “How will I make a living?”

Instead of focusing on the present, students were dwelling on the past and worrying about the future. What is necessary, Slotnick says, is to reapproach how we manage these stressors. While destructive decision-making can be driven by academic and social influences in students’ lives, by focusing on the management of academic and competitive-based stress—factors in why teens adopt destructive behavior—students can implement their own stress-reducing strategies and promote healthy behavior.

At the core of Slotnick’s work is social and emotional learning—teaching students relaxation responses to help them build emotional intelligence. “It helps them become more aware of how their thoughts and feelings affect their behavior. That’s an important process for adolescents—developing that level of self-awareness,” Slotnick says. Stress induces a “fight, flight, freeze” response, which can manifest in aggressive thoughts and judgmental or critical thoughts of others. Those emotions are emulated in the body. “Just by bringing awareness to the body, it releases tension,” Slotnick says.

In a quiet classroom, Slotnick ran exercises and techniques that taught students to think and act deliberately. Striking Tibetan singing bowls that produce a calming C-sharp, he meditated with students and talked about proper nutrition, healthy sleeping habits, and effective communication with adults and peers. Students learned how to outsmart stress, find their centers, and thrive.

The lessons taught simple techniques for being intentionally present, such as using time between classes, or walking among the buildings, to breathe, feel the air, and focus. “After a few sessions, students love it, and they crave it,” Slotnick says. “That self-awareness leads to self-management. Now they can work with those feelings, and change them if necessary. Students take these lessons and develop their own practice. Ultimately, that will help them with their work, help them with taking tests, and—if they work on being more present and understanding inner thoughts and feelings—they will become more compassionate and empathetic.”

The benefits of mindfulness training extend to the larger community, too. “These lessons will help them make and maintain relationships. Often the inability to connect is fear based,” Slotnick says. “If we can be more present and calm, then we can be more open to connecting with others.”



DR. JENNIFER BRYAN SPOKE TO STUDENTS AND PARENTS ABOUT GENDER, SEXUAL IDENTITY, AND GENDER STEREOTYPES.



“Derby is a wonderfully supportive environment,” says Slotnick. “The nature of the classrooms, the campus village, the robust recess ... Derby has a supportive and nurturing community. A lot of people talk about it; Derby is actually doing what they say they do—improving both mind and heart.”

In conjunction with its wellness program this fall, Derby welcomed esteemed leaders in the fields of physiology and mindfulness to campus: a coordinated effort to promote new, positive ways of thinking.

Psychologist and author Dr. Jennifer Bryan addressed gender, sexual identity, and gender stereotypes with parents—and separately with students—as the first guest in Derby Academy’s new *Speaker Series*. Speaking with an audience in the Healey Family Center for Innovation, Dr. Bryan discussed ways to keep pace with the social changes in our culture and classrooms, and how students, families, and schools can work together to understand these powerful components of development in Pre-K to Grade 8 children and adolescents.



RANA CHUDNOFSKY LED A WORKSHOP IN MINDFULNESS AND STRESS REDUCTION FOR PARENTS, FACULTY, AND STAFF.

Rana Chudnofsky, MEd, director of resilient youth programming at the Benson-Henry Institute’s *Resilient Schools* program, led a workshop in mindfulness and stress-reduction techniques with parents and administrators during a Parents Association meeting in October. Chudnofsky had met with faculty earlier in the year to participate in a research-based program that helps teachers and students gain control of stressors, thereby reducing student stress and teacher burnout, and promoting a positive school climate.