

Elementary Students Focus on Being Mindful

By Sophie Braccini



Students in Millie Tang's fourth grade class at Los Perales Elementary School practice deep breathing. Photo Andy Scheck

When Lucy Dendinger decided to become the chairperson of the Los Perales Elementary School PTA Red Ribbon Committee in Moraga, she had no idea where that would lead. Now after four years, the Lamorinda school has pioneered a practice of mindfulness with students that could change how they deal with stress in the future.

"When I took over the Red Ribbon program for the Los Perales PTA, I asked myself what we were trying to teach the children," remembers Dendinger. "A friend of mine, Lynn Esquer, a psychologist, told me about a book, '10 Mindful Minutes: Giving Our Children – and Ourselves – the Social and Emotional Skills to Reduce Stress and Anxiety for Healthier, Happier Lives,' by Goldie Hawn. Inspired by that book, I thought that we could give the children tools to make the right choices themselves, rather than telling them what these choices were. Such a practice would empower them for the future, especially in our community where they are so stressed."

What the children are taught during Mindful Choices week is to breathe deeply and practice awareness of their senses in order to live in the moment and make good choices "Before you make that quick decision on the playground and perhaps a conflict, or before a test, you pause, you breathe and you notice," says Dendinger. The LP mom says the deep breathing has a physiological effect on the brain.

"Today was a good day to talk about it," said Dendinger's 10-year-old daughter Anna. "We had two tests, one of them a math chapter test. I deep breathed before the test, and I think that I did very well." The LP fourth grader simply sits in her chair

palms up on her knees; she bows her head or closes her eyes and breathes deeply for a little while. She says that she uses it when she has difficulty falling asleep, and even more impressively, she says that if she gets hurt, she will breathe deeply for a few seconds to stop crying.

"As a teacher who has been using the deep breathing myself, I use it with my students when they come in from an event that they need to refocus back to a calming environment – like [after the] Halloween parade, we had to regroup and switch back to work mode," said Los Perales fourth grade teacher Millie Tang. "I use it when we need to pause and switch to another big task, before a big assessment I take them through the process, at this point, the classroom is quiet, calm and they're ready to move forward." Tang also uses the process when the kids are overly anxious in general – having a heated discussion or are unhappy about an issue.

The Hawn Foundation conducted years of research about how to help children cope with stress and anxiety in the wake of 9/11. "The foundation has done extensive research over the last 10 years on teaching children skills to manage stress and help them be optimistic and happy," says Dendinger. A publication by the foundation reports that children who participate in deep breathing practice have better reading scores, less absenteeism, a 25 percent reduction in aggression on playgrounds, better attention and more concentration, quicker reactivity in answering questions and responding to teachers, better interpersonal relationships, an improved ability to manage stress, and a 63 percent rise in optimism.

Dendinger asked a group of

mothers to read the book, as well as her friends Esquer and Maura Wolf from the Saint Mary's Leadership Center, and involved them in a collaborative process to design the curriculum. "We started four years ago with a five-day curriculum," explains Dendinger.

The first day talks about the brain. "They learn about the 'Guard Dog' (amygdala) and the 'Wise Old Owl' (prefrontal cortex); and how deep breathing can help calm the 'dog' so that the 'owl' can think and remember clearly," explains Dendinger. The second day is about mindful eating and tasting. The children are asked to take a little piece of food, like a raisin, look at it, smell it, very slowly chew it and notice all the flavors that emerge as they do. "It's mindful eating instead of mouthful eating," says Dendinger. The third day is about practicing deep breathing and noticing how it helps calm the brain and make better choices. On the fourth day the children practice mindful listening, pay attention to what is going on in their environment, and discuss how the awareness of what is going on can help make good choices. "On Friday the children get a 'mindful stone' – polished colorful stones with a note recommending to put the stone in a place where they will be reminded to pause, breathe deeply and notice," says Dendinger.

Dendinger says that the parents and the school have been very supportive. She has formalized the curriculum and she says she is ready to pass it on to other schools if they want to use it and improve upon it.

"If we could get this practice into all three elementary schools can you imagine the calming effect we will have, town-wise?" said Tang.

Lamorinda's Specialties of the House Soup's On!

By Amanda Kuehn Carroll

November is upon us and at long last the evenings have cooled to a proper fall temperature. It's chili weather. Chowder weather. Bisque and broth and bouillon weather. If the nip in the air has you hungering for something that simmers, Lamorinda has you covered.

Tucked inside a complex of office buildings, on a hill that meanders just off of Mt. Diablo Boulevard behind the Veteran's Memorial Center, **Fiona's Pantry** is a hidden gem that is worth an afternoon treasure hunt. Current construction



Chicken and Veggie with Cheese Tortellini from Fiona's Pantry

detours make the trip a bit tricky, but if you can get yourself into 3732 and find your way to suite 170, you'll reach a haven of a café that offers fresh soups daily. When asked what sort of soups Fiona's serves, owner Ferdinand Eres paused. "I'm drawing a blank," he remarked with a chuckle. He called on a co-worker and a customer and together the three compiled an impressively diverse list of savory substances. From a traditional chicken noodle to Italian sausage and kale, a zuppa toscana to artichoke and asparagus, all of Fiona's soups are made from scratch. There's also egg drop soup, chicken pot pie soup, tamarind, pesto and tomato bisque with cheese tortellini. One of the most popular has been the Thai coconut chicken. A sample of the chicken and veggie proved to be simple but satisfying, with large chunks of chicken swimming in a savory spicy broth. To finish things off, all first time customers are given one of Fiona's famous cookies free of charge, making a trip to the pantry well worth the hunting. Fiona's is located at 3732 Mt Diablo Blvd., Lafayette, (925) 283-1444.

As an appetizer or an entrée, Shelby's house-made soups are always created from scratch. With large bay windows and a corner spot on Orinda's Theatre Square, **Shelby's** offers a classy take on French-California bistro cuisine. Their chicken and vegetable soup offers the feel-good taste



Chicken and Vegetable Soup at Shelby's

Photos A.K. Carroll

of childhood, soft chunks of cabbage and slips of potato swirling with the carrots and onions of a French pot-au-feu. Seasoned with the slightest hint of kefir lime, it is a surprisingly well-rounded bowlful. Shelby's also offers a vegetarian chili, mildly seasoned and packed full of hearty beans. Shelby's is located at 2 Theatre Square in Orinda, (925) 254-9687.

If you're up for some ethnic flair when it comes to soup-type soothing, the pho at Little Hearty Noodle might just hit the spot. Though the ambiance of the restaurant lacks the color and space you'd expect for a dine-in experience, with 17 varieties of "noodles and broth" you're sure to find something to suit your palate's preferences. Carry out is a snap, and comes highly recommended for a cozy night home. **Little Hearty Noodle** is located at 578 Center Street in Moraga, (925) 376-7600.

Local Teens Celebrate Three Years on Radio

Submitted by Cynthia Brian



From left: Express Yourself radio hosts Caiseen Kelley and Henna Hundal

Photo Cynthia Brian

The internationally broadcast radio program, Express Yourself, will celebrate its third year on Nov. 21. Launched in 2011 on the Voice America Kids Network as an outreach service of the Moraga non-profit, Be the Star You Are (www.BTSYA.org) with five local youth, the program has become the top-rated program in the world on the network and now boasts 30 reporters and hosts from around the country.

"Working on Express Yourself has honed my skills as a journalist to effectively report on a vast variety of topics," said local teen host Henna Hundal. "I can now not only discuss fun topics like favorite books or the

latest teen trends, but I'm also able to talk about the tough issues like bullying and domestic violence. Through the show, I've learned how to carefully probe these tough topics by having my curiosity and inquisitiveness tempered with empathy and care."

Miramonte High School student Caiseen Kelley, a host, guest coordinator, and the Techy Talk reporter for the program, said this has been "the opportunity of a lifetime. This is a unique chance to get unedited opinions from, for, and by youth expressed around the world. Express Yourself lives up to its motto of *Where teens talk and the world listens!*"

Steven Zhou, a Miramonte graduate now studying at Pepperdine University is thrilled to know that the efforts he began in high school as the show's first host and administrator are still going strong. Produced by Starstyle Productions, the program broadcasts at noon every Tuesday on the Voice America Kids Network to 132 countries. Photos, descriptions, links, and archives of the shows are available at www.ExpressYourself-TeenRadio.com.

For local youth interested in getting involved, send an email to the producer, btsyateenradio@gmail.com.

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