



# A Beautiful MIND

After crisscrossing the globe, Toronto's Theo Koffler is hooking kids on the idea that peace begins between four eyes.

**By Sheila Dropkin**

Photography by Taku Kumabe



heo Koffler has taken the path less traveled. Leaving Canada for schooling in England, then moving to Israel for work, marriage, and motherhood, she has settled in California. But it is her work with Mindfulness Without Borders that situates her today.

An interactive nonprofit educational initiative based in San Francisco, Mindfulness Without Borders is designed to develop character and leadership skills in teenagers and young adults as well as their parents, educators, and health care providers, with the ultimate goal of promoting positive emotional development and social understanding. As of now, MWB has ongoing programs in Israel, Rwanda, and Nigeria, with plans to launch pilot programs in high schools and community centers in the Greater Toronto Area and the Bay Area of Northern California next fall.

Meeting in her parents' spacious, art- and antique-filled condo suite in midtown Toronto—her parents, Marvelle and Murray Koffler, founded Shoppers Drug Mart and were early investors in the Four Seasons—at the tail end of a whirlwind North American tour to promote the program, she is accompanied by Patrick Iregura and Emery Rutagonya, MWB facilitators in Rwanda who lost almost all of their immediate and extended families during the 1994 Rwanda genocide, and MWB strategic adviser and facilitator in the Greater Toronto Area, musician and lifestyle counselor Gary Diggins.

Slender, with long black hair and wearing a print summer dress, Koffler is constantly on the move, solicitous of everyone in the room and concerned that the photographer has everything he requires. Intermittently sitting for photos alongside her colleagues, she makes the time to talk about her family and her varied interests. The idea of working to promote peace between people started germinating during her years in Israel; amid constant conflicts between Israelis and Palestinians, she realized the “us and them paradigm separates and marginalizes people in such a way that peace and community building are more difficult to access.”

After completing her undergraduate studies in social

sciences at the University of Toronto, Oxford University, and back in Ontario at the University of Windsor, Koffler had planned to earn a master's degree in education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education; instead, capitalizing on her business background, in 1979 she moved to Israel, where she co-founded Super-Pharm with her father and older brother, Leon. By the time she returned to North America 13 years later, there were 23 Super-Pharm drugstores across Israel. The company, still headed by Leon, has since grown to 155 stores in Israel, 85 in China, and 24 in Poland.

“After leaving Israel,” Koffler says, “I had always held a vision to one day come back to fragmented communities with a conversation that took shape around the premise that ‘peace begins between four eyes.’ To this end, the seeds for this idea were watered as a result of an incredible opportunity to act as the program adviser for the Initiative on Contemplation and Education at the Garrison Institute. I co-authored a mapping research study on contemplation and education in K-12 North American educational settings. Through this research, I encountered the scientists, educators, and professionals who have shaped the field of mindful awareness, attention training, and social and emotional learning. Slowly, my calling began to reveal itself: to establish a foundation that integrates their best practices into educational workshops for at-risk communities.”

Koffler's decision to concentrate at least some of her efforts in Rwanda came after attending an exchange program in that war-torn country with her younger son's theater arts class at the California Institute of the Arts—institute students travel to Rwanda every summer to explore ways in which art can play a role in reconciliation and building community.

In 100 bloody days during the summer of 1994, over 800,000 men, women, and children were killed and tens of thousands wounded in Rwanda in a vicious civil war that pitted the majority Hutus against the minority Tutsis. Three quarters of the victims were Tutsi civilians. The situation was vitiated by the fact that the UN and individual countries were slow to intervene to stop the slaughter. Rwandans now live in relative peace, but tribal enmity and ancient hatreds continue to gurgle under the surface.

“We work in complex environments,” Koffler says. “We are forced to perpetually adapt and rethink which programs will render communities stronger and more resilient after conflict than they were before. Convening con-

versations on the *what* that leads to personal and community transformation, and providing skill sets that foster self-awareness, social awareness, and responsible decision making, is the narrative that we address.”

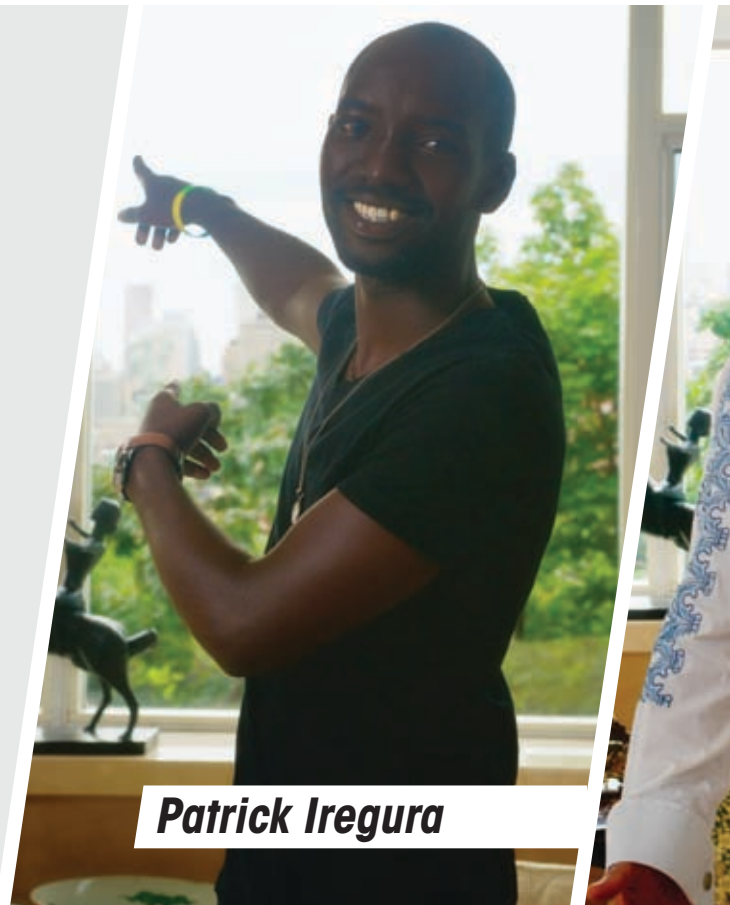
To date, more than 350 students have participated in MWB’s in-school programs and 625 teachers, health care providers, and community leaders have undertaken training workshops. The program for students operates with the use of Mindfulness Ambassador Councils, an in-school club activity that offers youth the “opportunity to explore the practices of social and emotional learning and mindful living as a way to navigate through some of the harsh realities that come with living in today’s world.” Three- and five-day professional development workshops provide educators with the tools to implement and sustain the MAC initiative in schools and community centers.

MWB is currently active in five high schools in Kigali, Rwanda. “We are facilitators, not teachers,” Iregura says. “We provide the students with a safe space to share matters of the heart and, together, we discover ways to manage their unique situations. Security is still a big priority here. Some people who were involved in the genocide are still a threat. The Ministry of Education realizes the importance of this kind of work and is supportive of our efforts.”

“Girls’ education is a priority in Rwanda,” Rutagonya adds. “So many men were killed or jailed during the genocide that the female population now dominates in numbers. We can’t move forward unless we improve the status of women and girls in every sphere of society. We have to build a new order of institutions so women can serve as leaders and agents for change.”

Despite the horrors they endured as youngsters and their relative poverty, both men completed university. Iregura has a degree in education from the Kigali Institute of Education, and Rutagonya earned a degree in sociology from the National University of Rwanda. Self-described “citizens of the world,” they hope to further their educations in the West. “I want to maintain my connection with Rwanda,” Iregura says, “but at the same time, I want to expand my horizons and forge new relationships in the

L-R: Patrick Iregura, Strategic Development Coordinator, Rwanda; Gary Diggins, MWB Strategic Advisor; Theo Koffler; Emery Rutagonya, Partner Relations Associate, Rwanda.



**Patrick Iregura**

world.” He adds that he feels very connected to young people and would like to help orphans by providing them with education. “I was very impressed by Israel,” he says of his visit there for a speaking tour. “Israelis have a highly developed sense of resilience and character; they work hard and understand that education is the core to making a difference.”

“My trips to both Rwanda and Nigeria have given me a deep appreciation of how some human beings, in either meager or hard circumstances, will intentionally act with kindness and care rather than resort to self-serving agendas,” Diggins adds. “In the midst of very complex realities, our work in Africa is about creating space for nourishing conversations that foster compassion and empathy.”

MWB was introduced in Nigeria in 2007, when the foundation was invited to make a presentation at the first-ever International Conference on Global Ethics, Values and Mindfulness in Jos, Nigeria. Since then, the organization has held a number of professional training sessions in the country and launched the MAC in five schools, which now boast 150 participants.

In Israel, MWB is currently working with students from the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya on the



**Gary Diggins**



**Theo Koffler**



**Emery Rutagonyo**

**“WE PROVIDE THE STUDENTS WITH A SAFE SPACE TO SHARE MATTERS OF THE HEART AND, TOGETHER, WE DISCOVER WAYS TO MANAGE THEIR UNIQUE SITUATIONS.”**

insights and experiences related to reconciliation, conflict resolution, and peace-building processes,” Koffler says. “After completing the two-semester accredited course, seven Israeli student participants and one faculty member attended a three-week student exchange program in Rwanda. MWB hosted a two-day symposium in Kigali for the IDC students to meet their Rwandan counterparts. Currently, we are in conversations with faculty of New College at the University of Toronto to join in this exchange.”

e-Diplomacy Forum, an e-exchange endeavor between IDC master’s students of diplomacy and conflict resolution and undergraduate students at the Center for Conflict Management at the National University of Rwanda. The program provides students with an opportunity to “explore their individual

“As North Americans, we have been blessed with educational opportunities that are not enjoyed by many of the world’s population,” Diggins adds. “At the same time, much of our intellectual training either downplays or ignores the need for drawing out the emotional life and cultivating leadership skills that enable a young person to contribute uniquely back into his or her community. Our focus is to gather students into a council format and appeal to their own wisdom through peer discussions and reflective practices. As a senior adviser, I am devoted to the ongoing evolution of our pedagogy, refining the content to the times and needs of each community we serve.”

“Mindfulness Without Borders places high priority on educational approaches that cultivate an ‘intelligence of the heart,’” Koffler says. “It’s a big vision, and I remain hopeful that our conversations around the world will nurture others to be ambassadors for mindfulness and move us toward a more just, compassionate society.” **LM**

---

For more information, visit [mindfulnesswithoutborders.org](http://mindfulnesswithoutborders.org).