Theo Koffler 1972 has pushed the edges in a non-traditional career and has done her utmost to make this world a better place for all.
Theo Koffler 1972 (Tiburon, CA) in conversation with Louise Park MacMillan 1972

As promised, in every Chronicle we will feature a fascinating Old Girl currently residing in the U.S. Theo Koffler 1972 has pushed the edges in a non-traditional career and has done her utmost to make this world a better place for all.

If you could go back in time, what is the one thing you’d most like to tell yourself as a child?

I would say to my teenage self at Havergal College, "you are good enough just as you are." I would remind myself, when the chips were down, that it is what it is. I would forgive myself when I faltered. I would have found a technique to stop the self-limiting thoughts and I would have found a way to mitigate all the gut-wrenching moments of ‘should I or shouldn't I?’ Honestly, I was a teenager who would do almost anything to be valued by others. It was important for my parents to recognize my achievements and for my closest friends to see me as equal. Whether I worked hard at getting good grades for recognition, played piano for hours to get praise from my teacher or got invited to a PJ party to hang with school friends, recognition was paramount to my happiness. Now, I can see the incongruities. Fast forward years later, I now get that the things that make me different, make me.

Tell me a bit about your career paths?

I like to say that my first career was one that gave me the fundamental business skills that I needed to be effective in my corporate life, and that my second career as a social entrepreneur was the work which strengthened my personal development. As the co-founder and V-P of marketing of Super-Pharm Israel Ltd., I worked alongside my brother Leon to build Israel’s national drugstore. Like Shoppers Drug Mart, Super-Pharm became one of the first retail chains that mirrored best North American business practices in a country that was trying to develop itself on the world economic stage, despite the pervasive threat of war. From 1979 to 2003, I helped to open 23 drugstores.

However, this career came to a complete halt after the birth of my second son, when I was diagnosed with Lupus. It’s an autoimmune disease in which the body’s immune system mistakenly attacks its own healthy tissues. While the cause is not entirely clear, it is believed to involve environmental, hormonal and genetic factors. Through my lens, I feel that the stressors from living in a country of war and in an unhealthy marriage were contributing factors. It led me to wonder what could have been the missing piece in my education that would have helped me to better navigate the ups and downs of living in Israel with Lupus. As I began to heal, I learned that I was missing social and emotional competence. Thus, I began to dream about starting a new career to help equip young people with the soft skills that they need to navigate the ups and downs of daily life. Ten years ago, Mindfulness Without Borders was born.

I would never have come into this field had it not been for my journey with Lupus. Furthermore, while this diagnosis has been my greatest obstacle, it is also my greatest gift!
How has your work changed you?

Every day, I thank my health for bringing me the self-realization that has unfolded because of my practice of mindfulness. All in all, my idea of living mindfully follows the sage advice of my wonderful colleague and friend Jon Kabat Zinn—who says to pay attention from moment to moment as if my life depended on it. Equally, I feel gratitude for my work life for giving me the courage to be innovative, and to be in service to others. Since 2007, Mindfulness Without Borders’ evidence-based programs have expanded to more than 15 countries due, in large part, to our online certification training. My heart swells when I imagine the ripple effect of more young people acquiring the social and emotional competencies which they need in order to live a meaningful life. My life has an enormous sense of meaning because of the people, places and experiences that I have encountered as a result of my work.

What advice do you have for kids and families who are struggling?

Offering advice to people whom I don’t know has never been part of my mojo. In fact, I never want to presume that what I may advise is right for someone else, especially for those who are suffering. That said, if I had one wish for those who are struggling, it would be that they don’t suffer in silence. I think that kids feel so shamed by their peers, that it prevents them from trusting others enough to share their challenges. In turn, they become isolated and feel pushed out of the very community to which they belong. Young people need to know that everyone has inner struggles despite the demons which they carry. The idea is to reach out for support and to communicate – especially to someone with whom they can feel comfortable and safe.

I think that more emphasis has to be placed on adults to hear and value what their kids are saying and experiencing. The world is a complex place in which to live, and listening carefully and acknowledging kids’ challenges can make a big difference to their confidence and to adults’ ability to meet their needs. For me, as a mother of two, I have always encouraged my children to lean into their difficult emotions, knowing that in time, things change. There is no timeline to getting better; it’s more about meeting themselves just where they are and making responsible choices.

While it’s hard to have hope and faith that everything is happening for a reason and will work itself out, it does make good sense to persuade young people who are feeling caught in their struggles that taking one step at a time may be just what’s needed to ease the pain.

Can you tell us any stories of working with kids or caregivers?

One of my favourite experiences in the field – during the days that we were working on the ground in Africa – took place at Hope North Secondary and Vocational School for former child soldiers in northern Uganda. My colleague Gary Diggins and I were co-facilitating one of the lessons of our Mindfulness Ambassador Council that imparts the soft skills needed to navigate the ups and downs of daily life.

The students met for 12 in-class meetings in very sparse classroom conditions. They sat together in a shared learning environment, learned strategies to identify and manage emotions, shared matters of the heart, listened to the insights of their peers and discussed how they could develop a more compassionate understanding of the complex world in which they live. What is most memorable is that, despite the trauma that these students faced in their earlier years as former child soldiers, they had big dreams. They wanted to graduate school to become doctors, nurses, engineers, politicians and change-makers. It was during my time with these students that I recognized that everywhere in the world, people are broken. Suffering is constant; conditions vary, and yet we can leave the world a little better than the way we found it if we embrace hope, imagination and compassion.
How does someone access your program and training?

It’s very user-friendly. Anyone interested in exploring the core concepts of mindfulness and social-emotional intelligence as they relate to self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, attention and stress management can join us online for a five-session course called Mindful 365.

Health professionals and educators can join us for certification training this summer in person in Toronto or online. Graduates will be equipped with the resources and lesson materials to apply our evidence-based program for youth, (a 12-week intervention that addresses the strategies youth need to support their healthy development) to their respective constituencies as certified facilitators.

What books have most inspired you and/or have shaped your life?

**Deepak Chopra:** *Quantum Healing: Exploring the Frontiers of Mind/Body Healing*

**Viktor Frankl:** *Man’s Search for Meaning*

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**Peter Block:** *The Structure of Community*

**Jack Kornfield:** *A Wise Heart*

**Michel A. Singer:** *The Surrender Experiment: My Journey into Life’s Perfection*

**Atwul Gawande:** *Being Mortal*

**Dr. Paul Kalinithi:** *When Breath Becomes Air*

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**What brought you to San Francisco?**

After a few years’ effort of trying to heal, I realized that I may have a better support system if I moved back to Toronto to be with family and friends. At the time, my husband could only find work in San Francisco, so off we went to the beautiful bay area! Being back on North American soil was truly what I needed. Getting out of Israel and immersing myself in an environment that magnified peace and harmony was the perfect remedy.

If you are interested in learning more about Mindfulness Without Borders, please contact Theo at theo@mwithoutborders.org or visit www.mindfulnesswithoutborders.org.