Room to Breathe

a film by russell long

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Official Trailer: https://vimeo.com/47294651
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LOG LINE:

*Room to Breathe* is a surprising story of transformation as struggling kids in a San Francisco public middle school are introduced to the practice of mindfulness meditation. Topping the district in disciplinary suspensions, and with overcrowded classrooms creating a nearly impossible learning environment, overwhelmed administrators are left with stark choices. Do they repeat the cycle of forcing tuned-out children to listen, or experiment with a set of age-old inner practices that may provide them with the social, emotional, and attentional skills that they need to succeed?

SYNOPSIS:

*Room to Breathe* is a surprising story of transformation as struggling kids in a San Francisco public middle school are introduced to the practice of mindfulness meditation.

The film begins in the halls of Marina Middle School in San Francisco – kids pouring out of classrooms, shouting to each other as they sweep down the stairwells into a concrete schoolyard that lies outside of the massive art deco building that is the weekday home to almost 1,000 children. The tough language and raw physicality suggests the underlying violence to which these kids are exposed. Topping the San Francisco school district in disciplinary suspensions, and with overcrowded classrooms creating a nearly impossible learning environment, overwhelmed administrators are left with stark choices. Do they repeat the cycle of forcing tuned-out children to listen, or experiment with a set of age-old inner practices that may provide them with the social and emotional skills that they need to succeed?

We are introduced to Omar, a troubled African American boy with a love for playing basketball, partly to forget his brother's murder in an unsolved crime in 2007; Lesly, a highly social girl with no interest in academics, whose hard-working parents immigrated from Mexico; Lesly's friend Jacqueline, a tough and disruptive girl who is frequently in trouble with school administrators; and Gerardo, a winsome but defiant boy who sees himself as unfairly persecuted by his primary teacher and other school officials.

*Room to Breathe* has two primary adult figures -- Ling Busche, an overworked young Asian-American counselor helping seventh graders deal with what they perceive as a hostile school or home environments, and Megan Cowan, a buoyant 30-something Executive Director of a growing mindfulness-in-education organization.

The first question is whether it’s already too late for these kids. Confronted by defiance, contempt for authority figures, poor discipline, and more interest in “social” than learning, their young meditation teacher runs into unexpected trouble in the classroom. Will she succeed in overcoming street-hardened defiance to open their minds and hearts?

Under Megan's guidance, our characters and their peers slowly start to take greater control over themselves, and a new sense of calm begins to permeate their worlds, in class and at home.
BACKGROUND:

Inner city schools across the nation are in trouble. Signs of distress are clear: ten percent of urban teachers are threatened with violence, there are 1.7 million non-fatal crimes a year in schools, ranging from assault to theft, ten percent of boys carry a weapon to school, a quarter of students 12-18 report gang activity at their school, and suicide is the third leading cause of death for those 15-24 years of age.[1] In addition, one out of every five children has a diagnosable mental illness.

The consequences for education are stark. In many major cities, about half of high school students drop out, totaling about 1.2 million students a year; similarly, about 50 percent of teachers drop out after just five years in the profession. As former Secretary of State Colin Powell commented in his role as founding chair of America’s Promise Alliance, “When more than 1 million students a year drop out of high school, it's more than a problem, it's a catastrophe.”

The film takes a solutions-oriented approach, focusing on a powerful self-regulatory technique that is being introduced into a handful of public schools across the nation.

Based on the experiences depicted in this film, this technique, called “mindfulness”, appears to have the potential to significantly transform the ways in which kids relate to their peers, their teachers, and their world, to reduce violence and bullying, and to create marked improvements in academic performance and high school graduation rates. Recent studies by UCLA and other institutions corroborate what is seen in this film, linking mindfulness to major improvements in learning, attention, emotional regulation, empathy, impulse control, executive function, optimism, and successful conflict resolution. Research also suggests that mindfulness leads to reductions in stress and improvements in social skills.

A survey from Mindful Schools shows[2]:

Teachers report-
92% personally benefitted from the program
84% students calm more easily
81% students benefit

Students report:
84% will use mindfulness in the future
61% can focus more in class
53% mindfulness helps make decisions


DIRECTORS’ STATEMENT:

As a full-time environmental activist for many years prior to making Room To Breathe, my colleagues and I used to think of ourselves as front-line fighters against the root causes of climate change, air, water, and toxic pollution. We fought corporate polluters in legislative hearing rooms, courthouses, boardrooms, shareholder meetings, in the media, and sometimes with megaphones in front of corporate suites. And then one day, I realized we had it all wrong – we were only combating the symptoms of these problems. The real problems were far deeper, tied to our culture’s pervasive disconnect from the natural world, our families, and our own deeper selves.

I made Room To Breathe to try to examine the potential for tackling these problems through social and emotional learning programs focused on the nation’s youth, in public school classrooms. I believe these programs offer great promise for helping kids reconnect with their innermost selves, our society, and the natural world. And as those kids mature, they will hopefully carry this new level of awareness into the world. This has certainly been proven to me as a result of my own inner practice of doing transcendental meditation in my teens, and later, mindfulness.

The kids in Room To Breathe face incredible challenges in their lives. Some, like Omar and Gerardo, live in neighborhoods riddled with drugs and gangs, with families that have been painfully impacted by violence -- Omar’s older brother was shot to death when he was just 8 years old, and Gerardo’s father is a former gang member who is now successfully pulling his life together. Others, such as Lesly and Jacqueline both have immigrant parents working long hours, living in cramped quarters, and whose English skills prevent them from helping their kids with schoolwork.

Seeing the behavioral problems of these and other 7th graders at Marina Middle School, its easy to fall into the trap of thinking that their parents don’t discipline their kids, teach them the value of education, or respect for authority. But when the camera goes home with them, we learn that, like typical parents across America, each of their parents cares deeply about their children’s education and futures. We see them trying to cultivate respect for teachers. We get a sense of their financial struggles, and we witness them trying to persuade their often indifferent kids to take advantage of educational opportunities that might really help them to build better futures.

As mindfulness is introduced to the 7th grade classes at Marina Middle School, we slowly witness its transformative power in our characters. Though each of the kids respond to mindfulness in a different way, the themes are consistent -- they begin to exhibit less anger, to become calmer, to focus more, to raise their grades, and to become more respectful of others, including their teachers. This is similar to what has happened in many other schools that have introduced mindfulness to their students. Preliminary studies on mindfulness in public schools now confirm this finding (see www.mindfulschools.org).

As Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn says in our bonus material, it becomes clear that there may be a missing “R” in the three “Rs” of “reading, writing, and ’rithmetic” -- the capacity for inward “reflection”. And in developing that capacity, kids learn a new way to approach their lives.
It has been said that as our children go, so goes the nation. I believe this is true, and that teaching our children how to foster deeper connections with themselves through inward reflection will lead to greater connections with the natural world, with family, and society. I’m confident that these social and emotional learning programs will continue to grow rapidly, helping to rebalance an educational system that has been obsessively focused only on the acquisition and testing of external knowledge. Bringing inner awareness to outer knowledge is essential for education to have any true meaning in our lives.

-Russell Long
Room to Breathe

CAST:

Omar Breedlove
7th grader

Jacqueline Chirinos
7th grader

Lesly Martinez
7th grader

Gerardo Quintero
7th grader
MEGAN COWAN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF PROGRAMS, MINDFUL SCHOOLS
Megan Cowan received a BA in Comparative Health and Healing from the University of California, Berkeley, and has been practicing mindfulness since 1996 and working with children in various settings since 1999. She first brought these two passions together in 2001 when she expanded a mindfulness program from 15 to over 100 children and created mindfulness curriculum for monthly and summer programs. As a cofounder of Mindful Schools, Megan has taught mindfulness to over 2000 children and trained over 200 teachers. Megan also consults with families on how to incorporate and apply mindfulness to address a variety of struggles that families encounter and increase the happiness of households.

LING BUSCHE, SCHOOL COUNSELOR
After receiving a Bachelors of Science from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Ling Busche began her career as a teacher. She has worked as an elementary school teacher (grades 4 and 1) in Las Vegas, Nevada and Oakland, California. In her capacity as a classroom teacher she found herself spending more and more time helping students mediate issues in the classroom and addressing social emotional issues. This is what prompted her to work on a Masters of Arts in Counseling Psychology at the University of San Francisco so that she could pursue becoming a school based counselor. While in graduate school Ling was a Site Coordinator for the after school program at Marina where she eventually went on to become a grade level counselor.

ANTHONY BRAXTON, ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL
After 20 years teaching middle school in California’s rural central valley Anthony has spent the past 5 years working as an assistant principal in San Francisco because of a desire to be a difference maker in the world, and most significantly, in his community. Committed to a free and equitable public school system, and in particular to middle schools, Anthony has served as a teacher and trainer of teachers throughout the United States and even a few years in Thailand.

TOM EHNLE, 7TH GRADE TEACHER
Tom has been teaching 7th grade at Marina Middle School since 2004 and it has been his only teaching position. He loves teaching kids and focuses primarily on teaching math and science. Tom grew up in Japan.
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Film Stills:
Filmmaker Bios:

**Russell Long, Producer/Director**
Russell Long is executive producer for the award-winning films Someplace With A Mountain, narrated by Chevy Chase, about the imminent displacement of Micronesians living on atolls due to sea-level rise (PBS affiliates, 2010), and A Sheltered Sea about marine protected areas (PBS affiliates, 2009). He is also executive producer of Sweet Dreams about the women of Rwanda emerging from genocide to create a new future (Silver Docs selection, 2012), and co-executive producer of The Island President about former Maldives' President Nasheed's efforts to stop global warming (Toronto Audience Award, PBS, 2012). As an environmental activist earlier in his career, he founded the environmental group Bluewater Network and was responsible for numerous state and federal laws including the United States’ first law to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. He received his B.A. from Harvard, MBA from Columbia, and attended Columbia’s Graduate Film Program. He serves on the Board of Friends of the Earth in Washington, D.C.

**Gail Mallimson, Co-Producer/Editor**
Gail Mallimson was the editor and writer for Training Rules, an award-winning documentary on the homophobic practices in women’s collegiate sports, and editor of Not In Our Town Northern California: When Hate Happens Here, an hour-long documentary on deadly hate violence over a five-year period in five regions in California. She also edited the documentary, What’s Race Got To Do With It by California Newsreel, which chronicles the experiences of a diverse group of college students engaged in dialogue on such issues as multiculturalism, social equity, and affirmative action. She is producer/director/videographer of The Edge Of The Wild, an hour-long documentary on the fight to save endangered species from the threat of suburbanization. In addition, she has edited and produced TV segments and educational videos for ZDTV, 21st Century Homes, Teachscape, StirTV, and many other non-profits and companies. She holds a BFA in painting and photography, and an MA in documentary film and photography, both from New York University. For more info, visit www.sfeditor.com.
HERVÉ COHEN, CINEMATOGRAPHER
Hervé Cohen is a French American documentary filmmaker and cinematographer. His work has taken him to various parts of the world from the Casamance in Senegal where he filmed the initiation ceremony of the young Diolas (award winning Sikambano, The Sons of the Sacred Woods) to the countryside of Sichuan, China, to follow the work of three traveling projectionists (Electric Shadows, winner of several international festivals). In 2008 he co-directed and shot Closer to the Dream for French television, a family road movie about the Democratic primaries in the U.S. Hervé has been working as a DP with Harvard professors Robb Moss and Peter Galison on an on-going project about nuclear waste in the United States called Nuclear Underground. He recently shot and edited the documentary Broken Stones by Guetty Felin, a film about self-recovery after the Haiti quake, which takes place around the ruins of the cathedral of Port-au-Prince. His current project is called The Music of Time, a documentary that he directed, shot and is currently editing; a poetic musical journey from the Andes to the Peruvian Amazon rainforest, to discover the greatest biodiversity in the world but also the fragility of the ecosystem – with the collaboration of musicians Wayne Shorter and Esperanza Spalding. For more info, visit www.hervecohen.com

DEB TULLMAN, CINEMATOGRAPHER
Deb Tullman holds a special place in her heart for the intimacy and immediacy that characterizes documentary film. Her shooting credits include: The Decency Gap (Peru, 2010), First and Loveliss, (winner: best documentary short at Outfest in 2008), PBS Frontline World: Flower Power (Equador, 2008). She has been running Candlefoot Productions in San Francisco since 2007 and has photographed numerous commissioned pieces for clients, including ABC, Peachpit Press, Union Bank, The Courage Campaign, and dozens of Bay Area non-profit organizations. She learned to shoot the way she learned to talk; no formal training, just did it obsessively and learned from her mistakes. She finds mindfulness to be the most important component of her ongoing training and is falling more and more deeply in love with her life and work.

B. QUINCY GRIFFIN, COMPOSER
Berkeley native B. Quincy Griffin has scored over a dozen feature films including Oscar nominated “Daughter from Danang” and Sundance Film Festival winner “My Flesh and Blood.” His music has recently been placed in the Benjamin Bratt film “La Mission”, “The Two Escobars” and “Better This World.” In addition, he recently produced the first ever Hip Hop songs for the television show “Dora the Explorer.” He was also the composer for the 2012 Oscar nominated Documentary short “The Barber of Birmingham.” Quincy founded and produced the Latin Hip-Hop band “O-Maya” and produces for Rapper Deuce Eclipse and Soul singer Luqman Frank. A sampling of Quincy’s work can be viewed and heard at www.quincygriffin.com.
**JOHN KANE, CINEMATOGRAPHER**

John Kane is a San Francisco-based documentary editor, cinematographer, and producer. Left In Baghdad, a film he co-directed, was broadcast nationally on the PBS series "Independent Lens" in 2008. Most recently, John edited Informant for director Jamie Meltzer (Off The Charts: The Song-Poem Story); this forthcoming, feature-length documentary received funding from Cinereach. He also edited and co-wrote The Most Distant Places — a film about doctors working in remote areas of Ecuador — for director Mike Seely, and was assistant editor on Explorer: Inside Guantanamo Bay for National Geographic Channel/Actual Films. In addition, John has taught filmmaking at the Art Institute of California at San Francisco and Academy of Art University. John holds a BA in English literature from Swarthmore College and an MFA in Documentary Film & Video from Stanford University.

**EMILY ENCINA, CINEMATOGRAPHER**

Emily Encina is a videographer, editor and educator working within the people of color and feminist communities in the Bay Area. She recently was the video designer for the multidisciplinary play, New Fire: To Put Things Right Again, a ceremonial performance about an indigenous Chicana's journey to getting well. She believes in the power of storytelling as a means for transformation and strengthening communities, and teaches videomaking classes and mentors artists. She has taught for the Center for Digital Storytelling, Lavender Youth Recreation and Information Center, the Queer Women of Color Media Arts Project, and the Multicultural Community Center at UC Berkeley. She has a BA in Feminist Studies and Community Studies, with a focus on social documentary from the University of California Santa Cruz.

**JAZMIN JONES, CINEMATOGRAPHER**

Jazmin Jones is a photographer, filmmaker and educator based in San Francisco. She graduated from BAVC’s Digital Pathways Video Program in 2006, where she worked on her first film, The Apollos, with Nick Parker. The film chronicles the passage of the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday in California, and won the Human Civil Rights Award from the National Association of Education in 2008. Her films have screened at the 51st San Francisco International Film Festival, the ITVS Community Project, the Future Filmmakers Festival, the Media That Matters Festival, and the 10th Annual Culture in the Classroom Conference, among others. Since graduating from Digital Pathways, Jazmin has taught in BAVC’s Factory program, acted as a videographer for GirlSource, and produced three films for Writerscorps. Currently, Jazmin is teaching at BAVC’s Digital Pathways Program, studying Cinema at CCSF, and pursuing freelance work.

**ANGELISA CANDLER, CINEMATOGRAPHER**

Angelisa Candler is a student at City College of San Francisco majoring in Anthropology. She has worked as a Teachers Assistant at the Bay Area Video coalition where she produced her first films. She has also worked with Longhouse Media for the 36-hour film festival in Seattle, Washington.
CREDITS:

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