Spirituality



Members of the Cleveland Department of Police attend a mindfulness retreat at River's Edge, a spirituality center sponsored by the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph. (Christine Schenk)



by Sr. Christine Schenk

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"Today we're not going to sit around and cry or anything like that. If you want to cry feel free, that's fine, but the goal today is to do some practice that is going to help you learn how to relax. And I think you're really, really going to enjoy it. I guarantee you'll be snoring at the end of the day."

So spoke Cleveland police officer Chris Gibbons as he introduced "A Day of Mindful Living," an innovative program for the Cleveland Division of Police, held at River's Edge, a spirituality and wellness center sponsored by the Sisters of St. Joseph.

The program, held Feb. 9, was the latest of six mindfulness training days designed to introduce law enforcement personnel to mindfulness practices such as yoga and meditation to manage stress and enhance their effectiveness on the street.

Such programs are increasingly popular with police departments around the country. In addition to Cleveland, departments in New York City, Tempe, Arizona, Madison, Wisconsin, Dallas, Texas, and Hillsboro, Oregon, have been introducing mindfulness practices to help officers deal with the inevitable stress that goes with their jobs.

A January article in the FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin summarizes extensive studies (such as this one) showing that mindfulness enhances officers' job performance and sense of well-being. According to the article's authors, "To reset their minds after a difficult encounter, officers must adapt quickly to the here and now. … [M]indfulness techniques have revealed how to help individuals focus on the present and maintain contact with their minds and bodies."

For Officer Cheri Maples, the training helped her change a volatile situation in Madison, Wisconsin, to one of forgiveness. According to reports, Maples had just returned from a mindfulness retreat when she was called to the home of a divorced father who was refusing to relinquish his daughter to his ex-wife after a weekend visit.

Before the retreat, Maples said she would have simply handcuffed the man and taken him to jail. But this time she spoke "from her heart" and gently persuaded the father to release his daughter. Her compassion reduced the distraught father to tears: "Here I am, 5'3" tall, with a gun belt strapped to my waist, and this 6'3" man is bawling like a baby in my arms," she recalls.

Mindfulness can also help police — indeed anyone — deal with the post-traumatic stress that inevitably accompanies violent encounters. One Kent State University study of 193 police officers demonstrated that those who maintained "mindful, non-judgmental awareness" while on duty experienced significantly fewer symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Cleveland law enforcement has had some painful struggles with hyper-alert officers using more force than necessary. In 2014, the U.S. Justice Department, while acknowledging that the majority of the force used by Cleveland police was "reasonable and not in violation of the Constitution," nevertheless concluded that the Cleveland Division of Police "engages in a pattern or practice of the use of excessive force in violation of the Fourth Amendment of the United States Constitution." The city eventually agreed to a consent decree, promising to implement major reforms, including stricter monitoring of the use of weapons and prohibiting retaliatory force (physical punishment after arrest).

In June 2015, Cleveland's police chief Calvin Williams called for a change in philosophy for law enforcement "from being a warrior ... to being a guardian." During the 2016 Republican National Convention, Williams courageously modeled what being a guardian looked like by patrolling packed downtown streets on a bicycle. Despite widespread predictions to the contrary, there was minimal violence. Under Williams' leadership, police officers were able to successfully deescalate angry confrontations between political protesters.

'God in the Wilderness' retreat sparks idea

Years before events leading up to the consent decree, however, Gibbons had been dreaming of a retreat-style program for his colleagues. Still, the decree was a tipping point that helped Gibbons and other concerned Clevelanders seize the moment and seed change.

Gibbons comes from a long line of police officers, all of whom served in Cleveland neighborhoods plagued by violence. His father and both grandfathers were policemen. (One was commissioned by Elliot Ness, the famous Untouchable leader who brought down Al Capone.)

Although he "loved working on the street," Gibbons accepted an offer to work in the Employee Assistance Program for the Cleveland police, so he could counsel officers struggling with addictions. As a young man, Gibbons said, "I drank a lot, had the

Irish curse, if you will." After getting sober, he worked for a time as a corrections officer and then entered the police academy. He never looked back. "I worked in the sixth district [where his father and grandfather had worked] and I really loved being a police officer," he said.

Eventually he was persuaded to work in employee assistance because his boss "wanted someone with a little background on how to get sober and I fit that bill." After the exciting unpredictability of being a beat officer, it took Gibbons a while to adjust.

But one day — after accompanying a shaken officer who had been shot at and was being reviewed for returning fire — he came to a realization. "My only job was just to be a friend to police officers, that's it," he said. "Contrary to everything you see in the news or on TV, officers do not take shootings lightly. … It is a horrifying moment for them."

Gibbons began searching for more effective ways to help his officers manage stress. He remembered the "God in the Wilderness" retreats he had attended at Cleveland's St. Ignatius High School.

"It was great experience. I loved it," he said. "We were every bit the nitwits just like high school boys. And yet we all connected to the retreats. … So, I thought, if young high school boys could connect with this, why couldn't adult police officers?"

And so began his search for a retreat-like experience that would be appropriate for a government entity with a diverse work force like the Cleveland Police Department.



Karen Mulcahy, Chris Gibbons, Chris Checkett and Heidi Beke-Harrigan lead "A Day of Mindful Living" training for Cleveland police at River's Edge spirituality center.* (Christine Schenk)

Enter Chris Checkett, a River's Edge psychotherapist with a long history of outreach to Cleveland's street people. Gibbons and Checkett had met through a mutual acquaintance and became friendly. Gibbons began referring officers to Checkett for help with stress-related issues. Slowly, with input and encouragement from other mutual friends, the vision of a mindfulness retreat/training day began to take shape.

As a young man Checkett had his own struggles with alcohol. "But I got sober," he said, "and I started to grow spiritually and wake up to the fact that there's a lot more out there than what I had envisioned for myself."

After moving to Cleveland to work with Habitat for Humanity, Checkett met his wife at the Catholic Worker House. For a time, he worked for a mental health agency as a street outreach worker. Eventually he pursued a master's degree in clinical social work. To this day the Checkett family ministers to street people through St. Paul's

Community Church, on the west side of Cleveland.

In 1997, Checkett attended a 21-day silent retreat with renowned mindfulness teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, and became deeply interested in mindfulness modalities. When he moved his psychotherapy practice to River's Edge — which also offers yoga and meditation workshops — Checkett realized, "I always had these ideas to put together days of mindfulness." He modeled his program on retreats he had experienced in Pittsburgh. "And it was basically a sitting, you know, breath meditation, walking meditation, eating meditation," he said.

When he met Gibbons, Checkett had already created and conducted several mindfulness days at River's Edge. "So, what happened was we found that this [mindfulness retreat] would work," remembers Gibbons. "And Chris [Checkett] already had it. It was almost plug and play."

Eleven officers attended the first program on Feb. 10, 2017. Six subsequent retreats have been held, including one held June 2017 attended by command staff. Of the 53 officers and command staff who attended the retreats, all reported feeling less stressed at the end of the day, and nearly all said they planned to continue the sitting and resting meditative practices as well as yoga.

Until now, the retreats have been funded by a small grant from the Congregation of St. Joseph in honor of deceased Sr. Theresine Cregan, whose brother, Fr. Jack Cregan, had served as a police chaplain before his death in 2012. But organizers have big plans if and when more funds become available.

Gibbons and Checkett dream of bringing mindfulness events to community centers throughout the city. They dream of building bridges between Cleveland's police and its citizens so that everyone may regularly experience the deep and calming oneness evoked through mindfulness practice.

What is mindfulness and why is it effective?

Checkett defines mindfulness as "returning to an object of meditation and then allowing distractions to come, and then returning to the object of mediation." He likes to quote U.S. Rep Tim Ryan of Youngstown — a Catholic fan of River's Edge — who introduced mindfulness training into the Youngstown school system. Ryan realized, said Checkett, "that during meditation he was creating this kind of space between him and the things that he's attached to. And the more he practices, the more space he has. … What's resulted is that he now has more space between

stimulus and response."



Christopher Gibbons, Sgt. Stephanie Murphy and Capt. Keith Sulzer at a mindfulness retreat at River's Edge Spirituality Center (Christine Schenk)

For police officers Gibbons continues, this means "if you need to go into action, you will actually be able to react more quickly because the time actually slows down a little bit ... because they're not uptight but slowed down. Slow is fast."

Capt. Keith Sulzer of the Cleveland Police Foundation attended the Feb. 9 program and hopes to see mindfulness practices spread throughout the Cleveland police department.

"This is a perfect opportunity for us to have a periodic meditation or room that we can go to and play a tape that reminds us what to do when we're in a critical situation," he said. "I think that would maybe save our lives, but also citizens' lives, where officers don't overreact and do the right thing to deescalate a situation and try to calm it down rather than immediately go into battle mode."

Christian traditions of mindfulness

Since many Cleveland police officers have roots in the Catholic tradition (and since River's Edge is largely Catholic) Checkett is careful to connect the dots between mindfulness and Christian contemplation. In fact, the interior states evoked via mindfulness practices are well known within the Christian tradition albeit with a slightly different emphasis.

According to Fr. Thomas Keating, "Mindfulness meditation is the discipline of the mind. Christian contemplative practices emphasize the heart and heartfulness." A Trappist monk, Keating is best known for his promotion of centering prayer. For him mindfulness and heartfulness are not mutually exclusive but neither are they identical: "Heartfulness is the cultivation of interior silence in relation to the ultimate reality, what in the Abrahamic traditions is called God."

In conversations with Buddhists and Hindus, Keating discovered "they have the notion of ultimate reality, but their relationship to it is impersonal. … Whereas in the Abrahamic traditions the capacity to relate personally through love is very strongly emphasized." Nevertheless, said Keating, "Contemplative traditions are moving towards the integration of both sides — mindfulness and heartfulness."

According to practitioner Karen Mulcahy, yoga was originally developed to prepare the body to sit in meditation. Mulcahy and Heidi Beke-Harrigan each teach specific yoga practices designed to help police deal with post-traumatic stress and decrease stress. As a veteran navy nurse, Mulcahy said she "felt compelled to become trained with yoga warrior and help those in need." Yoga warrior, "is designed specifically for military veterans, active duty military, and emergency responders who have PTSD and/or need to regularly combat stress."

Since police officers are always on hyperalert they are especially vulnerable to high levels of anxiety and stress. Unaddressed, these will eventually affect their health and lead to burnout. While yoga is neither a religion nor a religious practice, Mulcahy finds it can be quite spiritual and even enhance one's Christianity. "There are moments in yoga when you are in a peaceful stillness. It is then that one recognizes everything is miraculous," she said. "You feel a powerful connection with the highest power."

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A librarian by profession, Beke-Harrigan worked with health sciences students and faculty, which gave her a "strong grounding in evidence and science." She learned about yoga nidra during a stressful time in her personal journey. "I experienced deep peace, insight and the ability to navigate the choppy waters of life. … I was captivated and compelled to learn more."

Significant scientific research has shown yoga nidra's effectiveness in improving health and alleviating illness. It is highly accessible since "it is completely guided and all it requires is for one to sit down and listen," said Beke-Harrigan. The practice was so popular with Cleveland police officers that they asked for their own recordings to continue the practice at home. Beke-Harrigan, an associate member of the Congregation of St. Joseph, sees her work as embracing the community charism that "we are all one."

"The men and women who serve and protect us are asked to do their work in an ever more volatile world, and so if I can do a small thing in sharing practices that can help them 'be' in themselves and the world with a sense of connection and well-being I am happy to do that," she said.

[St. Joseph Sr. Christine Schenk served urban families for 18 years as a nurse midwife before co-founding FutureChurch, where she served for 23 years. She holds master's degrees in nursing and theology.]

**This story has been updated to include the correct cutline for the second photo.*