

Training aims to teach cops compassion

Leaders of the Lake Harriet Spiritual Community, where Justine Damond was a lecturer, worked with the MPD to develop a mindfulness and wellness program

By Zac Farber / zfarber@southwestjournal.com

Before she was shot and killed by Minneapolis police officer Mohamed Noor in July 2017, Justine Ruszczyk Damond worked as a yoga and meditation teacher and gave lectures about mindfulness and alternative healing practices to the Lake Harriet Spiritual Community (LHSC) in Linden Hills.

“Most people are kind of trying to walk into their life dragging this parachute of all of their past emotions and experiences with them, and they’re not able to sort of move forward into this sense of freedom,” she told an audience at LHSC two weeks before her death.

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Cindi Claypatch and Gary Perisian stand outside the Lake Harriet Spiritual Community near a bench dedicated in honor of Justine Ruszczyk Damond, an LHSC teacher who was shot and killed by a Minneapolis police officer in July 2017. Photo by Zac Farber

Conviction brings relief and calls for change

Mohamed Noor found guilty of Justine Damond’s murder

By Nate Gotlieb / ngotlieb@southwestjournal.com

John Ruszczyk said his family was satisfied with the outcome of a murder trial that will put his daughter’s killer, former Minneapolis police officer Mohamed Noor, behind bars.

On April 30, a jury convicted Noor of third-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter in the death of Justine Ruszczyk Damond, whom he shot in the alley behind her Fulton home.

Damond’s fiancé, Don, implored Minneapolis officers to live by their department’s motto: “to protect with courage, to serve with compassion.”

Neighbor Sarah Kuhn said a conviction doesn’t mean that the system is fixed.



Justine Damond’s father, John Ruszczyk, speaks to the media after his daughter’s killer, former Minneapolis police officer Mohamed Noor, was convicted of third-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter. Photo by Nate Gotlieb

Those were a sample of the reactions following the jury’s verdict in the July 2017 death of Damond, a 40-year-old native of Australia. The jury acquitted Noor of second-degree murder.

John Ruszczyk said he hoped the case would be a “catalyst for further change,” while Don Damond called Justine a “living example of compassion” whose legacy continues to this day.

Speaking for Justice for Justine, a group of neighborhood activists, Kuhn said the conviction was welcome and that they would continue to fight for justice for all victims of police violence.

(Justice for Justine was planning a rally Wednesday evening, after this edition of the Southwest Journal went to press).

“What Justine has gotten, we want for everyone,” Kuhn said. “If Justine is the

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Revamped Lola comes back to lake

After a rocky first season, the Bde Maka Ska concessioner has a new menu and new staff

By Michelle Bruch

Lola on the Lake reopened May 1 at Bde Maka Ska, looking to rebound from a difficult launch last year.

“You heard mixed reviews? Lol. We got our butts kicked,” owner Louis King wrote in an email. “But, we learned a lot. Met some great people. And, we have made changes in response to the feedback.”

He’s bringing on Executive Chef Eric Austin, known for his former restaurant Big E’s Soul Food on Eat Street.

“You’re going to see some twists that we did not have,” King said. “Minneapolis deserves the top talent that we can attract.”

The cold spring contributed to delaying Lola’s opening by a month, and bad weather shut it down early. The restaurant struggled with system glitches and absent young employees with the “payday flu,” King said. Lola started the season with its signature smoked foods, but after hearing complaints about smoke, staff cut back on grilling and used an indoor oven — still good, he said, but not the same.

Some critics were not kind. “If you enjoy horrible customer service and over-priced generic food, by all means head over there. You will see a beautiful lake. What you will not see? Me,” one Yelp reviewer wrote. East Calhoun Community Organization board members raised concerns about Lola’s food quality and business viability when Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board Commissioners Meg Forney and Jono Cowgill attended a community meeting in August.

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Kenilworth trail to close in coming weeks

Light rail construction will close trail until 2022; tree cutting to begin soon

By Andrew Hazzard / ahazzard@southwestjournal.com

A popular bike and pedestrian trail will close for three years as early as May 13 and in the following weeks some 1,300 trees will be cut along the Kenilworth Corridor as construction begins on the Southwest Light Rail Transit (SWLRT) project.

The Kenilworth trail will close from the Midtown Greenway to West 21st Street in Cedar-Isles-Dean and Kenwood until

2022. The South Cedar Lake Trail, which connects to the Midtown Greenway in West Calhoun, will also close in Hopkins and St. Louis Park up to France Avenue.

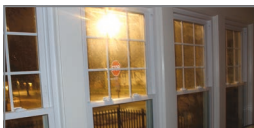
“This whole bike trail business has been a big deal,” SWLRT project manager Jim Alexander said. “We know there’s hardship. We have detours put out, we’re talking to the city. We’re going to all work through it.”

The 14.5-mile extension of the Green Line, connecting Minneapolis to Eden Prairie is expected to open in 2023.

Timber

The Metropolitan Council is planning to start felling trees in the Kenilworth Corridor despite a request from six local elected officials

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Revised Bryn Mawr plans place focus on seniors
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Canteen barista is a punk rock legend
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Almost two years later, Justine’s fiancé, Don Damond, is determined to move forward. On March 23, as prosecutors were preparing for Noor’s murder trial, Damond was sitting inside the Minneapolis Police Department’s brick training facility in North Minneapolis, attending one of the first mindfulness sessions ever held for the city’s police force and giving his input.

“He’s good at separating the sadness from the tragedy,” said Council Member Linea Palmisano (Ward 13), who also attended the session. “He’s extremely emotionally invested in making this better.”

Before the end of the year, all 888 MPD officers will be required to take a three-hour training session designed to improve their health, wellness and sense of compassion. They’ll learn how their brains and bodies respond to trauma and will practice deep breathing, meditation, body scans and other techniques for achieving mindfulness.

“It’s kind of out of the realm of what cops usually do,” said Sgt. Todd Sauvageau, a long-time MPD trainer who organized the program, now being tested on recruits and probationary officers. “We’re leery even to close our eyes around each other.”

Leading the training is Cindi Claypatch, a counselor and energy healer who Palmisano introduced to police. While she was alive, Justine Damond had alternated with Claypatch in guiding the Tuesday night meditation at the Lake Harriet Spiritual Community.

The mindfulness training program, Palmisano said, is an attempt to carry out Chief Medaria Arradondo’s mission of transforming the culture of his department, which has come under increased scrutiny after a series of high-profile police shootings.

Sauvageau said the cost of the program will likely be \$20,000 to \$25,000 — coming out of a \$150,000 general fund allocation for police wellness in the 2019 budget. (The rest of the wellness money, he said, could be spent on things like new workout equipment, yoga, a collaboration with a local mobile wellness company like Studio 9-to-5, or the in-house production of short videos on stretching and nutrition.)

Palmisano said she pushed for the program after noticing that police officers are tired, overworked, overstressed and “always in a multi-tasking mindset.”

“The danger is terrible policing and misjudgments that end in things like uses of force that aren’t necessary,” she said. “We want officers to approach everything with compassion and a clear head.”

Regulating fear

About 15 years ago, Richard Goerling was working as a patrol sergeant in the Hillsboro Police Department in Oregon when he became dismayed by the lack of tools available to combat the stress and trauma of the job.

“The data told us there was this landscape of human suffering inside the institution of policing,” he said. “I set out on a quest to figure out how to train police officers in a way that allowed them to maintain their humanity, their health and well-being.”

Today, Goerling is an affiliate associate professor in Pacific University’s psychology department and one of the most prominent police mindfulness trainers in the country; a two-year program he helped run for police in Menlo Park, California, cost the department more than \$160,000.

Goerling describes mindfulness as “a very practical, evidence-based tactical skills training.” Citing a peer-reviewed article he co-authored, Goerling claims an eight-week course in mindfulness can alleviate officers’ self-reported aggression, stress and burnout.

Although there are some promising findings and “emerging best practices,” he acknowledged that the field is still “the wild west” in terms of academic research.

“We really do believe that mindfulness is going to help a police officer take in data more clearly, to regulate ego, to regulate fear,” he said.



Starting in late August at its North Minneapolis training facility, the Minneapolis Police Department will hold 17 sessions of a new mindfulness and wellness program. By the end of the year, all MPD officers will be required to take the training.

Photo by Zac Farber

“In the next five, seven, 10 years, we’re going to be able to lock onto the efficacy of mindfulness with regard to reducing police violence.”

This past November, Palmisano was joined by Sauvageau and five other MPD officers as she attended one of Goerling’s three-day “residential intensive” trainings in Bend, Oregon.

Palmisano said she learned about “fierce compassion” — the ability to respond in the moment to people’s pain and suffering. “Mindfulness training is about officers being more responsive to the public than reactive,” she said.

By the end of the training, Palmisano knew she wanted to bring some sort of mindfulness program home to Minneapolis.

“It’s not just a training module, it’s an approach,” she said. “The hope is this becomes a part of their approach in what we license them to do, which is to carry a gun on our streets.”

The spiritual and the unseen

Palmisano and Sauvageau visited the Lake Harriet Spiritual Community in February to discuss the possibility of starting a mindfulness police training with Claypatch and Gary Perisian, the president of the LHSC’s coordinating council.

“If we could help [officers] deal with the stress, it would help the community and maybe stop something like what happened to Justine from happening to someone else,” Perisian said.

Sauvageau said he chose Claypatch to lead the program because she is “homegrown,” “understands what’s going on” and “has a history with Minneapolis.”

“She was married to a prosecutor who was a signing judge,” he said. “Minneapolis cops used to come to her house in the middle of the night to get warrants signed. She says, ‘I remember seeing some of the stress in their eyes, the tiredness.’”

Claypatch holds a master’s degree in human development from St. Mary’s University focusing on holistic health and has led health and wellness trainings in prisons, health care agencies and other public and private sector organizations.

On her website, where she is described as a “modern day mystic, shaman [and] uplifter,” Claypatch offers \$100 energy healing sessions — in person or via phone or Skype — that she says can help alleviate “chronic conditions” and “terminal illnesses.”

“She is great at normalizing what some think is woo woo and helps people be in relationship with the unseen,” her website says.

(Claypatch declined to comment for this story, not wanting to risk upsetting her relationship with the MPD.)

While he doesn’t know Claypatch personally, Goerling said mindfulness trainers need “to be very careful about how we brand it and how we present it.”

“It’s not responsible for us to bring spiritual things into the space of public safety,” he said.

Sauvageau responded that Claypatch “realizes who the audience is” at police trainings and “nothing in this class has ever crossed into religion.”

Measuring progress

In Mayor Jacob Frey’s State of the City address, he contrasted the mindfulness training program with “warrior-style trainings like killology,”

which Minneapolis is trying to eliminate.

“Fear-based trainings violate the values at the very heart of community policing,” he said. “We’ve incorporated wellness training for every officer to allow them to be their best versions of self.”

Council Member Andrea Jenkins (Ward 8) said she thinks mindfulness training can complement the work the new Office of Violence Prevention will do with communities of color “fearful for their lives when they encounter the police.”

“Policing is an extremely stressful job, they’re reliving everyone’s most tragic days, they’re observing that constantly,” she said. “I’d rather see these dollars supporting officer health and well-being as opposed to buying militaristic equipment.”

Yet Jenkins wondered during a March Public Safety committee meeting how to “measure progress” of a mindfulness training program. “Is that entirely up to the chief to determine?” she asked.

Nekima Levy Armstrong, a civil rights attorney and former president of the Minneapolis NAACP, said she wants to see “statistics and data” showing that mindfulness programs have decreased excessive force complaints and allegations of abuse in other jurisdictions.

“I want to make sure it’s not a fluffy way of addressing serious and significant systemic issues within the Minneapolis Police Department,” she said. “Quick fixes are not going to work to change a culture that is so deeply entrenched in taking a more militarized approach when patrolling certain communities, particularly communities of color.”

Goerling said a limited sample size makes it difficult to study whether mindfulness training is effective in curbing police violence.

“I could train 50 police officers at Albuquerque Police Department in New Mexico and three of them might get into a situation that requires serious force,” he said. “The data set is so small it’s not going to give us a good conclusion.”

Palmisano has noted that a Bend, Oregon, resilience program — which was offered to all officers on a weekly basis — has led to reduced workplace injuries, though she said Minneapolis would probably want to use a different measure of efficacy.

Nicholas T. Van Dam, an assistant professor at the University of Melbourne, has published papers criticizing the methodology and claims behind most academic research into mindfulness.

While the field of mindfulness research has exploded in recent decades, a 2015 review published in *American Psychologist* found that just 9% of research on mindfulness was tested with a control group in a clinical trial.

Van Dam warned that there could be a risk in “introducing mindfulness haphazardly” of adverse effects, such as negative emotions or depression. “People can get worse by practicing on their own in a way that is not helpful for them,” he said.

He said he has not seen any evidence that a one-off mindfulness training session would have tangible benefits for police officers or the public they serve.

“What few studies do exist seem to suggest

you probably need a reasonable amount of practice before you see any lasting effects,” he said.

“I’m not sure a one-time, three-hour overview of mindfulness techniques would do much outside of the session nor whether any effects would be discernibly different from a placebo effect.”

The placebo effect

Before her death, Damond was a devoted student of Joe Dispenza, a chiropractor, neuroscientist and mystic who wrote a best-selling book titled “You Are the Placebo.”

Dispenza says he healed his broken spinal vertebrae by using the placebo effect and surrendering to a “greater mind that has unlimited power.”

“I decided against the medical model and the expert recommendations,” he has written.

Yet the existence of some sort of neurochemical explanation for the placebo effect is becoming increasingly accepted by medical experts. Patients have been shown to respond positively to sugar pills as treatment for depression, stress and trauma, even when they know they’re just swallowing sugar.

Van Dam said placebo effects have become stronger in the past decade and experts are “not entirely sure” what’s causing the change.

“There is much evidence that all psychotherapies are similar — the so-called Dodo Bird verdict,” he said. “That is not necessarily a problem in the sense that anything that works might be helpful for a client.”

Sgt. Sauvageau said he considered mindfulness training more akin to yoga than to therapy.

“It’s about techniques we can try,” he said. “Cops need to realize you don’t always have to be on guard, wondering what the motive might be, sometimes it’s okay to realize you’re in a safe place and say, ‘It’s okay.’”

Could the training be effective for police officers even if it only works as a placebo? That’s a possibility that Sauvageau is willing to entertain.

“You don’t have to be a scientist to figure this stuff out,” he said. “Why is it that some people, when they’re told they’re sick and they’re dying, believe they’re sick and they’re dying and they die to the date that they’re told to die, and other people say, ‘I don’t believe that for a second,’ and they buck all odds and move a different direction?”

Starting afresh

Palmisano said one of her favorite parts of Claypatch’s training was a short meditation exercise. Claypatch spoke for about ten minutes during the meditation, though a few days later Palmisano couldn’t remember any of the words she used.

“It was beautiful, it was very therapeutic,” Palmisano said. “It was meant to show it doesn’t take a long time to go into yourself and thoroughly take account of your body and your mindset and to intentionally start afresh.”

Perisian said that working with Claypatch to develop a mindfulness program for police officers was a way for him and the Lake Harriet Spiritual Community to “channel the pain” of Damond’s death.

“I know that if it had happened to someone else, Justine would be leading this right now,” he said.