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Education | by Michael Bradley



West Chester University's Christine Moriconi and Donald McCown at the school's new Center for Contemplative Studies

Stress Relief

The WCU student body finds medicine for the soul in mindfulness.

When finals come around on college campuses, the stress builds. Students put in long hours reviewing the semester, down countless caffeinated drinks, sacrifice personal hygiene for extra study time, and generally whip themselves into a frenzied state.

And those are the ones who went to class all semester.

In early December, West Chester University's Center for Contemplative Studies provided a daylong antidote to the madness. For eight hours, the CCS staged a variety of programs designed to calm those who found the finals process had become overwhelming. It offered meditation, yoga, tai chi, and just

some quiet spaces where students could find respite from the academic whirlwind. "We wanted to teach them little things they can do to deal with stress in the moment," Donald McCown says.

McCown is a professor at WCU and co-director of the center, which opened its doors officially in September, thanks in large part to a \$250,000 gift from Pat and Diane Croce. After spending years as a nomadic presence on campus, offering students, faculty and staff opportunities to not only practice stress reduction and mindfulness but also improve their overall physical and mental health, the CCS moved into its permanent home on South Church Street. From there, it hopes to grow into a community resource

that delivers the kind of situation-specific support it provided during finals week and make an ongoing effort to show people how to navigate life's everyday challenges.

The CCS offers a minor in contemplative studies that's designed to help those entering the healthcare field find new ways to assist patients and their families. Since its beginning in 2005 as a stress reduction center, the CCS has grown considerably, and thanks to the Croces' gift, it has the potential to make an even greater impact moving forward. "We want to incorporate mental-health first aid for the student body," says Christine Moriconi, co-director of the center. "There has been an incredible increase in depression and suicide in the student population."

"Mindfulness practice is about being who you are. You are not isolated in the soup of life. It's about working with whatever is coming up and exploring how you want to explore the world."

According to McCown, many colleges have mindfulness programs, but few have them from an academic perspective. WCU's contemplative-studies minor requires students to complete 18 credits of core and elective courses in subjects like stress management, positive psychology, and philosophies and religions of the Far East. There were 30 people in the program this past fall. McCown sees it as something that could accompany a major in public health or health education. "It also allows students to develop a contemplative outlook on their own continuing education," he says.

Which brings us to Croce, who began his travels on the spiritual path two years ago. The self-described "alley cat" says "the seeds had been germinating" for him for a long while, and that his willingness to redirect his journey has made a significant difference in his life. Because of that, he was excited to learn about the center at WCU and didn't have to be sold too hard to make a commitment. "I was psyched that they had a program and needed our help," Croce says. "They are so passionate about mindfulness in all areas of the student community, and with teachers and staff. Mindfulness is as important

as math. If you are not mindful, you are not in the moment."

That is Croce's goal—to live and interact with others entirely in the now. He began exploring mindfulness in late 2013, when he was pitching a book to an agent. Instead of providing what Croce thought would be a quick green light, the agent challenged Croce to go further. "The guy blew me away," Croce says. "He said I had already written a best-seller (*I Feel Great and You Will Too!*), but I needed to write a transformational book. I had already been searching for the other end of the narrative."

Today, Croce is a perfect front man for not only the center but also mindfulness in general. He has worked to change how his mind looks at life. "Most of our lives occur in our heads," he says.

Now, he allows himself to be "present" in his daily pursuits. He remains the human to-do list, and he wants to accomplish things, but his focus is not on money or fame, rather the ability to handle situations calmly and in a way that benefits everyone involved.

To some, the idea of meditation and yoga, as well as the Center for Contemplative Studies itself, sounds too crunchy and like a new-age hoax. In reality, the entire concept has had tremendous success in helping to limit anxiety and removing some of the stresses that impede achievement.

Since Croce was raised a Roman Catholic,

some might consider all of this a step away from his faith. Can a person be true to the church while also pursuing a Zen path and quoting the Dalai Lama? Croce says he has great discussions about spirituality with his aunt, who is a nun. Further, he asserts that he and Diane haven't had an argument in two years. *Seinfeld* fans might remember Kramer's "serenity now" mantra that ended with his throwing a sizable tantrum, but Croce points to "his shift in consciousness" that allows him to see each situation in the moment and not as part of a larger narrative that can sometimes torpedo relationships. "This isn't self-help stuff," he says. "It's about understanding one's self."

Moriconi and McCown are trying to help the West Chester community do the same thing. Thanks to Croce, they have more resources than ever to achieve that goal. "Pat Croce is amazing," Moriconi says. "He is a phenomenally inspiring leader and has a humbleness about him that is incredible. He has given us the freedom to explore what direction we want to go in and has been so open with his ideas. We are so grateful for everything he has let us do at West Chester. And Diane is an amazing woman who is giving and open."

Moriconi and McCown hope to make WCU's whole campus like that.

To learn more about the Center for Contemplative Studies, visit www.wcupa.edu.

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