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Wilmington "social entrepreneur" Sam Beard (right) is working to enlist 1 billion people in his campaign of meditation and mindfulness. See page 12.



JOE DEL TUFO

PROFILE

Can Mindfulness Save the Planet?

Big-thinking Sam Beard thinks so. If he can persuade 100,000 Delawareans to meditate daily, he might convince the world. By Bob Yearick

Sam Beard wants you to meditate. He wants your neighbor to meditate. He wants your friends and family and people all over the world to meditate.

So he aims to enlist 1 billion people in his campaign of mindfulness. And what Beard wants, he usually gets, through sheer dint of personality and persistence.

Beard has a 50-year track record as “a social entrepreneur.” He has created and chaired programs for seven U.S. presidents that have collectively led to more than 10 million jobs for the low-income population. With Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis and U.S. Sen. Robert Taft Jr., he founded the Jefferson Awards Foundation in 1972 to create a gold seal for public service in America. After initiating a training program for student leaders nine years ago, JAF has trained more than 20,000. It is active in hundreds of high schools, which has resulted in more than 20 million hours of service to date. But all that was a mere prelude, he says, to the mindfulness and meditation project. “Genetically, I seem to think big,” he says. “But this will be the biggest thing I’ve done.”

And despite his age—77—the tall, trim



Beard, third from the right, meditates with staffers at Boys & Girls Clubs of Delaware.

grandfather expects to be around when the 1 billion goal is reached. “I believe I will be mentally and physical healthy till I’m 100,” he says, “and I have no desire to retire.”

Beard describes mindfulness as meditation that focuses on awareness of the present while observing thoughts and feelings from a distance. Practitioners say it reduces stress and depression; improves empathy, compassion and creativity; and boosts concentration and awareness. It has also been credited with alleviating physical ailments such as diabetes, hypertension, psoriasis—any disease related to inflammation.

Meditating is not complicated, though Beard perhaps oversimplifies when he describes it: “Just close your eyes, breathe in and breathe out.”

Simplicity aside, persuading a billion people to do it would represent a tectonic shift in a society that seems to turn instinctively to pharmacological solutions for stress and emotional problems.

The engine driving Beard’s campaign

is Global Investment Foundation for Tomorrow, a Delaware-based not-for-profit. Through GIFT, he is using his home state as a proving ground for the worldwide project. His immediate target: getting 100,000 Delawareans into meditation in five years.

Toward that end, he has organized an army of true believers. And “army” is an appropriate term. Many of those enlisted in his cause are military veterans who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. Others are professionals who work with veterans.

Freddy Lee Allen and Dr. Jennifer Tedesco are among them. They met seven years ago when Allen visited Tedesco, a psychologist at the Veterans Administration Medical Center in Elsmere who specializes in PTSD. Allen, an Army veteran who was discharged in 2000, at first ignored his problems, then tried unsuccessfully to deal with them through prescription drugs. Medication made his condition worse, so he quickly spiraled downward, going through a divorce, then losing his job and home.

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Health Habits of Delawareans

First come the holidays, then come the New Year’s resolutions. Here’s a look at our gym habits come Jan. 1.

—Brooke Schultz

2,000+

Average number of new members who join a YMCA in January

9:30-11:30 a.m. & 5-7 p.m.

Most popular times to go to the gym

Tedesco introduced him to mindfulness-based stress reduction. Allen calls it “transformative.” He warns, however, that “it’s not a magic pill,” and “it doesn’t happen overnight.” It required practice and what he calls “my full-on attention.” Eventually, “I learned how to reshape my ability to manage some of the crappy things in life—as well as some of the good things,” he says. “It gets you on a path to dealing with everything in a gentle, kind way, including yourself. It compels you to pay attention to what’s going on right now, including feelings I used to push away. Now I know I’m supposed to sit with those feelings and notice how they affect me.”

Today, Allen, who lives in Newark, is an outreach specialist at the Vet Center on Centerville Road in Wilmington, which offers free behavioral counseling for veterans. He has an amicable relationship with his ex-wife and is close to his four “beautiful” children, though he previously distanced himself, fearing how he would act around them because of his PTSD.

Neither Tedesco, who lives in New Jersey, nor Allen had heard of Beard before this year. Tedesco met him in January. Beard now views her as a key resource. In March, she helped him introduce GIFT to a crowd of about 200 in the Hotel du Pont’s Gold Ballroom, which was something of a watershed event in his campaign.

In his speech that day, he spoke in typically epic Beardian terms: “[Meditation can] elevate human behavior ... and this gives us an opportunity to be more mindful, increase our sense of compassion, increase the sense we’re all in this together. And it wouldn’t be bad to try to *save the planet*.”

Beard first encountered meditation in a casual way when he was in his 30s, but it didn’t work the way it was intended. “When I meditated,” he says, “I found myself just falling asleep.”

About two years ago, he went through a personal financial crisis that left him search-

ing for peace of mind. He turned to meditation. This time he took a deep dive, listening to CDs and reading, he says, 300 books over the past three years. Now he tries to do it for about 30 minutes twice a day. Like Allen, he has been changed. Beard, a good person, became a better person.

“I liked people [before], but I was not good at empathy,” he says. “Meditation and mindfulness changed my priorities.” He says it enabled him to answer the question, “Who is Sam Beard?”

Beard was raised in comfort in New York City, attended excellent private schools—“feeder schools for the Ivy League”—then went to Yale before earning a master’s in history from Columbia University. By the time he moved to Wilmington in 1980, he was a divorced father of three and well known in Washington, where he had worked with the Nixon, Ford and Carter administrations. Just before coming to Delaware, he helped secure a federal grant that essentially kept Hercules Inc. in town. Soon after moving to Delaware, he became an ally of the administration in Wilmington.

By 1988, Beard had remarried and made an unsuccessful run for the U.S. Senate. “I’m not really political,” he says, “but I thought I could do more through that office.” Now, operating out of his office in the Community Service Building in Wilmington, he flies all over the world, looking to raise \$1 billion in philanthropy and services through GIFT “over the next 15 to 20 years.” In mid-May, he was in Tokyo. In June, it was London and Brussels (before coming back early for his granddaughter’s graduation to middle school). Australia and India also are in the mix.

He has already generated action locally. Last summer, staffers at 30 Boys & Girls Clubs of Delaware took eight weeks of mindfulness training. George Krupanski, executive director of the organization, says he hopes the training can be passed on to

the teens. “There are so many stresses on the lives of young people today—family, school, peers—and they react with the first emotion that pops into their heads,” Krupanski says. “[The training would] help them control how they react.”

Veterans are a special initiative for Beard, and the VA Medical Center, led by Tedesco, who has trained more than 1,500 who suffer from PTSD with mindfulness-based stress reduction. One problem, says Tedesco: “There are just not enough teachers, and we are looking to Sam to provide the resources to train the trainers. Sam knows the people. And he can hustle.”

Indeed, Beard is constantly recruiting and expanding his reach. Just ask Fred Sears, a two-term Wilmington city councilman under former mayor Bill McLaughlin who has served on more than 40 boards over the years, including the Wilmington Economic and Financial Advisory Council, the Delaware Association of Nonprofit Agencies and the Delaware State Chamber of Commerce. In other words, Sears knows the movers and shakers. And Beard is not above using Sears as a sounding board as well as a conduit to get introductions to those movers and shakers.

“Sam has uncontrolled enthusiasm. You can’t get into a meeting or discussion with him that you don’t feel you have to do something afterward,” says Sears. “And he really doesn’t take no for an answer. Eventually, the answer is always yes.”

In his speech to that Gold Ballroom crowd, Beard hinted that his real goal goes beyond a mere 1 billion people: “There are about 10 [million] to 15 million Americans who meditate and get the benefits of it,” he told his audience. “That means there are 360 million that aren’t. And around the world there may be a billion people who meditate, which means there are 7 billion that are not.”

So, fair warning, world: Sam Beard is coming. Get ready to say yes. **D**

1.5-3

Average number of times an individual goes to the gym each week

Monday

Most popular gym day

\$50-\$70

Average cost of a gym membership in Delaware

2.01.18

When gym attendance may start to dip

After 24 weeks

Most people stop going to the gym