

community

Raising Baltimore

One child at a time

What do kids growing up in the toughest parts of inner-city Baltimore need most? Three guys returned to find out—and changed lives and a neighborhood in the process.

Story by Carsten Knox

Photographs by Mark Mahaney





The founders of the Holistic Life Foundation, from left: Andy Gonzalez, Ali Smith, and Atman Smith.

Baltimore is a city of corners and alleys.

At night, the corners in the Western District are lit by the blue glow of police cameras, a crime deterrent. The alleys run through the middle of block after block of Baltimore's famous row houses, providing sheltered places for kids to play and a quick exit for those with something to run from.

The uncharitable might call it a ghetto. The Western District in particular has been beset by poverty, drug abuse, and violence: 34% of the children here, most of them African American, live below the poverty line, compared to 14% in the rest of the state. And while some of the homes here are well kept—the paint fresh, lawns mowed—many blocks are punctuated with abandoned properties, “the vacants,” their windows boarded.

The house at 2008 North Smallwood lies in the middle of one of these blocks. This is where brothers Ali and Atman Smith grew up. And it's here that, with their friend Andres “Andy” Gonzalez, they formed the non-profit Holistic Life Foundation (HLF) in 2001.

Starting with 20 fifth-grade boys, the foundation's after-school program introduced yoga, mindfulness, urban gardening, and teamwork to children in the neighborhood in an effort to revive the community through its youngest, most vulnerable members. In a city where the dropout rate for high school students is routinely higher than 50%, 19 of those first 20 boys graduated and the other got his GED.

Hundreds of youngsters have now passed through the program. And researchers from Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and Penn State University have begun to study the work being done by the guys at Holistic Life. They're paying special attention to the program's effect on children's moods, relationships with peers and teachers, and emotional self-regulation. After more than a decade, Ali, Atman, and Andy's work is getting noticed beyond the blocks of the Western District.

Down a narrow alley off North Smallwood is

The Quiet Place. It's a former vacant lot, hidden by rows of old houses and decaying cement walls, transformed into a park. HLF did this. There are benches, barbecue grills, garbage cans, blue rain barrels, and a vegetable garden growing tomatoes, basil, beets, cucumbers, peppers, watermelons, cantaloupes, sage, cilantro, lilies, lavender, and a whole bunch of mint.

“The city cuts the grass but they're being kind of slow about it this year,” Ali says.

At 36, he has a large presence, laid-back but serious. He's bald, with a beard that frames his cheeks and chin. He dresses casually. On this hot summer day, he's in a T-shirt and shiny gold basketball shorts.

Ali's cell phone rings. “Killer Cam!” he says, smiling. “Hey, you comin' tomorrow, right? Just listen to your mother, please. Just listen to your mother so you can come tomorrow.” Tomorrow is a cookout at The Quiet Place, organized by HLF, a chance for the →

Below: Darrius Douglas, 22, was in the first Holistic Life Foundation program, which was offered after school at Windsor Hills Elementary in Baltimore's North Smallwood neighborhood. He now teaches with HLF as a volunteer. "People wonder why a lot of black guys end up in the streets," he says. "That's cause they don't have nothing in their life." Opposite: Kaila Winkler practices her breathing.

community to get together. Ali signs off, "All right, that's what's up."

A lean, athletic man, looking like a young Bob Marley with short, messy dreads, walks up to Ali's red Chevy Trailblazer. It's Atman. He's 34, with a radiating calm like his brother's, dressed casual and comfortable. The bumper sticker on the back of Atman's black Nissan XTerra is a Marley quote: "None but ourselves can free our mind."

Atman climbs into the Trailblazer. He says to Ali, "Thank you, chauffeur."

Ali says, "You know how I do. Call me Jeeves."

Then Andy jumps in the car. He's 33, quick to smile, with a thin beard and long hair tied back in a ponytail. Ali points the car downtown, with Kanye West's summer smash "Mercy" playing on the stereo.

Ali muses on how long a particular home on North Smallwood has been vacant. "That one on the corner, remember the guy who had the dog up on the roof?" he asks. He estimates it's been empty since he was a child. "Maybe there's two people living on this block—at the most," he says. Occasional gaps in the rows of homes begin to appear. "These spaces," Andy says, "are because the houses just kind of collapsed."

The blocks multiply, empty lots increase, and the city begins to resemble a war zone.

Ali and Atman call their parents hippies. But

when they were growing up, yoga wasn't something they talked about with their friends. "If we were vegan and did yoga now we'd be the coolest kids on the planet, but back then, nobody was doing it," says Ali. It was their father, Meredith "Mert" Smith, a basketball coach at Southern High School, and their godfather, Will Joyner, who taught them. Ali says it was normal to see his father in a headstand down in the basement. "We walked on past, went into the TV room to watch Saturday-morning cartoons, and when he was done he'd come join us."

Ali and Atman went to a Quaker school in a middle-class neighborhood, the Friends School of Baltimore, and his sons, Asuman and Amar, go there now. "Quaker school was kinda cool. It reinforced the meditation stuff we'd learned," says Ali. "We did meaningful worship, where you had your moment of silence, where you sat and kinda reflected on things."

Though Ali and Atman's mother, Fredine "Cassie" Smith, and Mert divorced in 1986, they remain friends. And it was around then, as the brothers became teenagers, that they really noticed the neighborhood change in the wake of the crack epidemic. "When we were kids, it was like one big family," says Ali. "You could point at every house on the block and say who lived there. But the people who were making sure good values were being passed on, who were strong male role models, drugs took them away from the community. They were either locked up or dead. And women, too. A generation was raised by grandparents or foster parents."

It limited people's vision of what they could be in life, says Atman. "Drug dealer, rapper, or athlete. You weren't worried about trying to be a scientist, or mathematician, or philosopher, or..."

"A yoga teacher," Ali adds.

In the late 1990s, while attending University of Maryland College Park, they met Andy Gonzalez, who grew up in Severn, Maryland, the youngest of five. Andy was a marketing major and musician with a passion for hip-hop. He started doing yoga with Ali and Atman and found his personal outlook changing. "A large part was that self-practice," he says. "When you're inside and you look outside, it's like, wow, man, the outside kinda sucks compared to the inside. Within us is transformative."

While at college, the guys started an informal reading group, devouring books on ancient history, spirituality, astronomy, astrology, and physics. The books inspired their practice and perspective. "We were trying to figure out what's the meaning of life, why we are here," says Atman. "Once we started analyzing that, we realized the purpose is to help everybody. Selfless service."

Ali and Andy finished school and moved back to Baltimore in 2001, with Atman joining them on weekends until he graduated in 2002. They knew that their selfless service needed to be here, at home. The answer was the Holistic Life Foundation. →





Children practice yoga with Andy Gonzalez (second row, third in from the wall) in the gymnasium of Robert W. Coleman Elementary School in Baltimore.





RULES!

Helping Kids Find Calm

By Ali, Atman & Andy

1 Start with love

If kids know we genuinely love and care for them, no matter what happens, they will be a lot more engaged. They may not have that family at home, so they're looking for a support system, people who care about them, who have their back.

2 Breathe

The breath is a powerful tool to help kids relax physically but it also helps their minds stop racing. It puts them in contact with how they feel. It's very powerful, for anyone, at any age. We start every class with the breath. It's a centering tool that we use to bring our students to focus in the room and inside of themselves. And over time they see how it's changing them, the way they feel about things, the way they interact with other people, the way they let other people control their moods or not control them, their impulsivity. If someone pushed them, in the past the kid might have reacted. But once they gain that introspection, there's a split second when they think, "I could punch this person or I could stop, go away, and do some breathing." They know the outcomes. Look what happens when you walk away: You don't have to deal with all this nonsense.

3 Meet the kids where they are

You can't go in with any preconceived notions; you gotta figure out what's going on with them. Where they are physically, mentally, and emotionally, and work from there. Never expect

the cookie-cutter approach to work. Have an idea of what you want to do, but be prepared to throw it all out the window at the drop of a hat. One of the best tools you have is observation: being able to gauge the energy and temperament of a kid and adjust from there. If they're too hyper, encourage some physical activity to burn off the excess energy. When you sense they're ready, you can push them along a bit. As the kids get older, we ask them: "Who are you?" They'll say their name, but we say, "No, that's your name. Who are you?" There's this realization that they're a part of a larger whole, which helps them feel responsible for themselves.

4 Let go of expectations

It's great to have goals for a child, but you are setting yourself up for failure if you have too many expectations. You'll start to blame yourself when those expectations are not met. The important part is for you to be in the moment, too. Be flexible and be resilient.

5 Have fun!

The kids have to be smiling, laughing, and having fun. Tell jokes, watch some cartoons so you can include pop culture references, quote songs they like—anything you can do to relate to them. Superhero movies and quality cartoons can help. You can see Bruce Banner in *The Incredible Hulk* movie doing breathing exercises to keep calm. We ask the kids, "Do you wanna be the Hulk, or do you wanna control the anger?"

Some 20 blocks west of North Smallwood is Windsor Hills Elementary School, where those first 20 boys attended HLF's after-school program. It was Cassie Smith who introduced Ali, Atman, and Andy to the principal. Cassie has worked in a variety of positions in the local education system, from probation officer for the Department of Juvenile Services to running mentorship programs and professional training. Since then HLF's program hasn't changed much, offering the kids a combination of instruction on breathing techniques, yoga, homework assistance, and team sports. The principal at Windsor Hills thought it would be a purely athletic program, but the teachers noticed a difference in the students right away. "The teachers said to me, whatever they are doing, get them to keep doing it," says Cassie.

"Before, these kids were always getting in fights, always getting suspended," says Ali. "But they loved the program. Holistic Life had 100% attendance every day."

After a year HLF moved the after-school program to the Druid Hill YMCA and enrollment went up to 27. They started including girls. Around the same time, they introduced more activities, including urban gardening and field trips. "We started taking them hiking and camping, to show them that, yeah, the world is bigger than just these square blocks you live in," says Ali. "It grew from there; they started to understand."

In HLF's fifth year, with their first group moving into high school, a friend suggested the trio should consider their own neighborhood, the North Smallwood area, for new students. Working with kids from their own block, Ali, Atman, and Andy's lives were enveloped by the program. "It became a 24-hour-a-day thing," says Ali. "With all the kids there, we didn't get a break in the summer. It was 365. It changed the dynamic of things."

Andy says that all this time spent with them has "changed the concept of cool" for these kids. "When it comes down to it, we're their homies."

"They're the real thing," says Mark Greenberg. "They have this sense of mission that is all their own."

Greenberg is the director of the Prevention Research Center for the Promotion of Human Development at Penn State University. Three years ago, he and Tamar Mendelson, assistant professor in the Department of Mental Health in the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, conducted a yearlong pilot study on the work HLF has been doing, measuring the impact of yoga and mindfulness on the kids' stress levels.

Greenberg noticed it's not just children walking in, doing yoga, and leaving. Discussion is part of it, too. "Ali, Atman, and Andy are transmitting a worldview about the holistic nature of our world, our interconnection, our need to take care of our environment, the need to take care of our relationships," he says. "It's implicit in the way they model



Andy Gonzalez, Ali Smith, and Atman Smith in West Baltimore, where most of HLF's programs take place.

things for kids but explicit in the discussions they have. It's very hard to separate the philosophy, the worldview, and the practices themselves."

Greenberg and Mendelson's study looked at approximately 100 children going through a 24-week program at four different schools where HLF provided instruction during the school day, as opposed to after school. The results were promising. The kids participating in the program showed significantly improved abilities to respond to stress and reported fewer intrusive thoughts and less rumination, the tendency to hash over thoughts in a negative way.

As a result, a second, more in-depth three-year study is now in progress at six Baltimore schools involving 250 children. "We're going to see whether it helps prevent or reduce the initiation of early substance use and if it helps with social and emotional functioning, behavior in class, and relationships with peers and teachers," says Mendelson. But as much as she's excited by the prospects, she is cautious not to overplay what they've learned so far. "There are many skeptics out there who may dismiss yoga-based practices because they sound new-agey, not scientific. It's really important that we do good science so we show the public at large that this kind of program may have real benefits for physical and mental health."

Ali and Atman stand in front of 12 children, all sitting cross-legged on their yoga mats in the gym at Robert W. Coleman elementary school. The kids vary in age, boys and girls. One boy is yelling for attention; Ali places his hands on the boy's shoulders.

"Everybody, front of your mat. We're gonna do a sunrise."

The children stand, though many are restless. They walk around their mats, talking loudly. But when Ali gestures, they all clap their hands together. "I wanna see a good backward bend, y'all," says Ali. Before long, the children are doing their downward dogs. "Crystal, that is great!" says Atman. "I wanna hear more breathing!" When an older child is distracting some of the younger ones, Atman tells him: "Just stop messing with the kids and do your exercise."

When the children do the poses correctly, they get a lot of "great jobs," high fives, and thumbs-up from Ali and Atman. And while chaos overcomes the class from time to time, after 30 minutes of yoga all the children are silent on their mats for a period of meditation. "Remember, still on the inside and still on the outside," says Ali. "If your mind's not still, your body's not going to be still."

Across the room stands Darrius Douglas. A graduate of HLF's program and now a volunteer →

Changing Lives

Since its program started in 2002, the Holistic Life Foundation has made a difference in hundreds of inner-city lives. Three participants tell their stories.

"I guess I could say I was one of the ones with the behavior problems," says **Darrius Douglas**, 22, who was in the first program and now teaches as a volunteer. "But once I got into it, I understood how the breath controls the body. I wasn't getting into arguments so much. I definitely thought more before I reacted." Later, when he failed out of school, HLF founders Ali and Atman Smith and Andy Gonzalez helped him write the letter to get him accepted back. "These guys helped me more than anyone else in my life."

Ramon Brown, 19, joined the after-school program at the

YMCA in second grade. The program changed his life, he says, after his father was shot and killed. "I took that very hard because I only saw him for a year, because he was locked up before that," says Brown. "But he was the best father ever for that year. I used to be so angry all the time. But once I started doin' the deep breathing, I saw myself calming down and getting less mad." Brown especially enjoyed anything to do with getting outside and getting his hands in the soil. Interested in environmental issues, he eventually spoke in front of the Baltimore City Council in support of a sustainability plan. He recalls

a conversation he had with HLF's Andy Gonzalez: "He said, 'You'll always be you, no matter what. No one can change you but yourself.' He made me think a lot about that."

Devontay Spivey, 19, joined the HLF program in 2007. "I got a lot out of the program," he says. "How to act right. How to carry yourself right. How to not just be in the streets, for real. You can learn other things by being around people. Basically, love." Now with his pharmacy technician certification, he says, "At first I didn't really think I'd be in the medical field, but I'm doing that to help people."

(see sidebar, above), Douglas is leading another group of 14 children, who are lying down on their mats. "Good job everybody, focus on that breath. Inhale deep and exhale that breath out. If your body is sore, send positive energy to those sore parts."

For the past three years, HLF's after-school program has been held at this school, just up the hill from North Smallwood, because it's where so many of the neighborhood kids go.

Coleman principal Carlillian Thompson makes sure that children with behavioral issues have the first chance at getting into the program. "Violence and substance abuse—some live with it and some

don't," she says. "When a parent has substance-abuse problems, they don't always have good parenting skills. Their anger is passed to the child." She's seen the good the leaders at HLF can do for her students. "For those children who don't have a father figure, they have become that to them."

The after-school program at Coleman is pre-kindergarten through fifth grade. Ali says that with so many younger children, HLF emphasizes mentorship and taking responsibility. So the fifth graders help oversee the younger kids. "They see that they have to model good behavior or we'll ask them, 'How old are you?' They'll say their age and we'll say, 'We've got a four-year-old over here doing the right thing. How come you're not?'"

For the 2011/2012 school year, enrollment in the after-school program was 25 at the beginning and rose to 32 by the end of the year. In 2012/2013, enrollment began at 54 and is expected to rise to the mid-60s.

Ali, Atman, and Andy are in their 12th year running HLF, which has been slowly expanding. They've initiated seniors programs and adult programs at drug-treatment centers and mental-health facilities, adjusting the practices for the demographic. They've been invited to speak at conferences and have twice been to Madison, Wisconsin, to teach mindfulness and yoga in schools there. The principal at Frederick Douglass High School, just behind Coleman, wants HLF in his school.

With these opportunities, funding for a workforce development program to enable HLF to pay its volunteers is crucial. "We have these young men who have had mindfulness practice for 10 years," says Atman. "And they are all familiar with the environment in which they'd be teaching." But the money isn't there yet.

A place of peace in the inner city: HLF's The Quiet Place.





Atman Smith teaches Eric Denully, left, and Keon Burnett.

The Quiet Place cookout is a big hit, despite the 100-degree heat of a Baltimore summer. More than 30 people from the neighborhood, including graduates of the HLF program, lounge on the benches, eating barbecued hamburgers, hotdogs, and veggie burgers provided by Ali, Atman, and Andy. Ali's girlfriend, Nora, and his two boys are there, hanging out. Ali and Atman's mom, Cassie, is there. As Ali bends over to lift a bag of ice out of the back of the Trailblazer, a boy jumps on his broad back.

That's Cameron Jefferies, "Killer Cam," the boy Ali was joking with on the phone a few days ago. Cam is a very active fifth grader who's been in the program for a year. "At first it felt boring," he says. "But then I started seeing everybody else doing it. I started kinda liking it." And then he adds with a smirk, when Atman is in earshot, "I went through a rough start with Atman. He was so correctional!"

As twilight settles on the park, fireflies come out, turning the dark green shadows into a miniature galaxy. A couple of the boys chase the insects through the tall grass. Ali and Atman's father, Mert, joins them at the cookout. He speaks slowly, thoughtfully, proud of the legacy his children are building in the community. "I think they're so well-equipped to do what they do, where they are," he says. "Their background in yoga, they went to the

Friends school, they grew up in the 'hood. And their program is universally effective."

In the foundation's first 10 years, grants the non-profit received barely paid for Ali, Atman, and Andy's gas money and Y memberships for the kids. The three have done some fee-for-service work and continue to hold part-time jobs on the weekend to help finance HLF. "I've seen a lot of sacrifices," says Cassie, who calls them "my three sons." "They decided it was worth more to give of themselves instead of getting a corporate job. Mert and I were in a position to support them financially, to help them through. Sometimes it was cars, housing, food. Whatever it was they needed. They weren't able to do a lot of the things they wanted to do, but they were happy."

Whatever the obstacles, Ali doesn't see them ever doing anything other than this. "It's definitely just been the three of us since the beginning, and we'll all be here—doing this and working with these kids in this city—until the grave. There are certain things in life where the universe is pushing you in a certain direction. You kinda accept it, roll with it. It takes on a life of its own." ●