

Dr. John Woodall



Do you want to help change the world? Dr. John Woodall, Founder and Director of the Unity Project, helps kids do just that. With the Unity Project, John empowers kids and youth to be the peacemakers of their generation. He's assisted people around the world—including war refugees in Bosnia and kids in New York after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

John grew up in the U.S. in Illinois. After completing his training as a psychiatrist at the University of California, he focused on helping people deal with trauma—by building their sense of compassion.

In December 2012, a gunman attacked Sandy Hook Elementary School in John's hometown of Newtown, Connecticut. John is now helping his neighbors through the Unity Project and other efforts. He says, "The greatest heroes, the greatest strength comes from people who have been through the greatest tragedies . . ."

Q: What was the most challenging experience for you when you were a child, and how did you handle it?

A: An addiction that my father lived through for many years that affected our whole household . . . It made me learn how to pray, and it made me learn how to look for the good and try to be open to God's guidance.

Q: How did you decide that you wanted to be a psychiatrist?

A: In medical school . . . I would spend all kinds of time with my patients . . . just talking to them, seeing how they were . . . I like to talk to people . . . It also seemed to me that it was a way to relate to people on a more spiritual level . . .

Q: What is the Unity Project, and what inspired you to create it?

A: [It] is a way of developing resilient strength among young people . . . We use service or the arts as a way to mine the gems of their inner strength . . . I've developed a series of . . . transformation exercises that refine those gems and turn them into real resilient skills . . . I started it . . . after many years of thinking deeply about how . . . to bring unity and peace to the world . . . It just seemed to me that . . . [we] needed something that built strengths instead of just try[ing] to treat symptoms.

Q: Describe a transformation exercise you use in the Unity Project.

A: At the end of every one of our group meetings . . . each [kid] will tell the others the strengths they saw in them that day . . . so that they all get to develop a sense of what their strengths are, and so that they're looking for them in other people. The more you look for them, the more you develop them in yourself . . .



John grew up near the Bahá'í House of Worship in Wilmette, IL. He became a Bahá'í after a visit to the Temple when he was 16.

Q: How do you define resilience, and why is it so important?

A: When you pull on a rubber band and let go . . . resilience is that ability to snap back to where you were. But another way to think of resilience is thriving in the face of difficulties, where you not only go back to normal, but might even become stronger as a result of those difficulties . . . It's the ability to learn wisdom and strength . . .

Questions and
Answers with an
Inspirational Bahá'í



Left: At the interfaith service attended by U.S. President Obama in Newtown, Connecticut, in December 2013, John read from the Bahá'í writings.

Below: John and Margo were on pilgrimage together in 2009 in Haifa, Israel. Three years later, they were married.

Q: How did you become involved with the tragedy in Newtown?

A: [My wife and] I live in Newtown . . . A lot of the kids who ran out of the school went to the fire station to be picked up by their parents. I was there that day trying to support my friends and neighbors . . . I'm running a group for teachers and the families, a therapy group. We're running the Unity Project at the high school, 1,750 kids . . . [I'm writing newspaper] articles helping people understand how to work with the suffering . . . And we just started . . . an interfaith junior youth program for 11- to 15-year-olds. We teach kids from all religious or non-religious backgrounds . . . that we're all one.

Q: What are the biggest challenges kids face in these tragic situations?

A: There is an inner power, an inner strength that we can turn to . . . After a terrible tragedy . . . we feel powerless over the things that are going on around us, and that can be very scary. And so we want to . . . manage that . . . not with fear, but with a sense of love and confidence. The second thing is that . . . we can feel very isolated, very alone, because we don't know how to explain what happened . . . It really builds our strength a lot if we find at least one person who we can reach out to . . . Another thing that's really helpful is to do something nice for someone else . . .

Q: In this issue, we're exploring building communities of hope. What are some ways kids can help build their communities?

A: We tell kids, we're not waiting—we're not waiting until you're out of high school . . . before you can start changing the world. If you're eight years old, you can start today . . . by making the life of someone close to you better . . . Do something to make the family better today, and then just go out from there, your neighbors and your school. Get a couple of friends to help you. And then go ask your friends, "What could we change that could make things better around here?" And then go do it . . . And before you know [it], you've changed a whole bunch of things . . .



In 2012, John worked with kids in Uganda during a trip for the Unity Project.

Q: If you had one wish for *Brilliant Star* readers, what would it be?

A: That their hearts are filled with joy, that every single day, they take time to be *filled* with joy, to practice joy. And they can do that by reading the wonderful prayers of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'u'lláh, and the Báb. And to not let other people's apathy dim their hearts.