

From the Inside

Kathy Marshall helps communities find peace by fostering resilience



Kathy Marshall
National Resilience Resource
Center

"Resilience is the natural human capacity for navigating life successfully. The opportunity one has to learn to tap resilience from the inside out makes the critical difference," says Kathy Marshall. In order to teach people how to realize their own natural resilience Marshall explains we must know that "every human being has natural resilience, realized or not, and extending essential environmental protective factors such as caring and support, encouraging high expectations, and meaningful opportunities for participation alone are not enough."

Kathy Marshall is the executive director of the National Resilience Resource Center (NRRC) in the College of Continuing Education. For more than 30 years she has directed systems changing prevention and education programs in schools, communities, and public policy arenas. In the fall of 1991 she came to the University of Minnesota to administer the U. S. Department of Education's Drug-Free Schools program for the Midwest Regional Center of the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory. This federally funded program, contracted through the University, laid the foundation for what would become the National Resilience Resource Center.

A different focus

Traditionally, medical, educational, correctional, and other health and human service programs focus on fixing youth and adult problems rather than developing health and well-being. "By shifting the lens to resilience we get much better results, reduce staff member burnout, and enhance organizational effectiveness," Marshall explains.

NRRC conducts ongoing systems change work in schools and communities in order to bring out the best in adults and young people. "To impact kids, we must first work with adults," Marshall emphasizes. By teaching community practitioners how to tap their own natural resilience and well-being, NRRC prepares adults to genuinely see all children, youth, and other adults as "at promise" rather than as "at risk."

From this vantage point practitioners begin to act with a sense of hope. The children, youth and families they serve experience a profound difference. This shift in tone and feeling ignites a "pilot light" and fosters or draws out the resilience of clients and students. The focus is not on the individual's "problem," but on the "promise" within each individual. Marshall stresses environmental protective factors are also essential in nurturing resilience. "I would never ignore the social agenda that is critical to improving our children's lives."

Caring, supportive relationships are extremely important. "It also makes a huge difference if we extend encouraging, high expectations, and offer meaningful opportunities for participation to those we serve," says Marshall. But getting whole community systems of adults-teachers, social workers, judges, parents, etc.-to a level of personal well-being that makes professionals and family members naturally caring, encouraging, and inviting is no small task.

"We believe significant, lasting change begins inside individuals and emanates outward, not the other way around. Systems change when groups of people together tap their resilience and change from the inside out," says Marshall. "We find learning how the protective mechanism of healthy psychological functioning occurs is one very major key to tapping resilience.

"Can you force someone to change their thinking?" Marshall asks. "Of course not; Victor Frankl taught us that so long ago. In other words, the decision about everything we choose to experience rests inside the individual. By discovering they truly operate from the inside out psychologically, both kids and adults can

navigate any life event in the best possible way. It is never about the content of *what* we think, but *that* we think."

Bridging the gap

The challenge behind NRRC's work lies in bridging the gap between resilience research and practice, since community practitioners are not familiar with the extensive research in the field. And researchers aren't in the trenches, like practitioners, where there is no time, team, or budget for building ideal programs and interventions.

Marshall feels fortunate the center had its beginnings at the University of Minnesota, because of the institution's research legacy. Leaders include Emmy Werner, Norm Garmezy, Ann Masten, Robert Blum and Michael Resnik (resilience and adolescent health); Joan Patterson (maternal and child health); Michael Baizerman (youth development and policy); John Romano (prevention and student well-being); and Karen Seashore-Lewis (school reform and learning communities). These, and others, were the lynchpins when Marshall first began her work at the University. She stresses that any resilience work done in the community must be solidly grounded in this research base.

The multidisciplinary research, as summarized by Bonnie Benard of West Ed for school and community practitioners, suggests we can develop resilience in others by extending caring supportive relationships, providing encouraging high expectations, and creating opportunities for meaningful participation. Each of these factors already exists in every community. "However, not necessarily for every youth or adult, and not to the degree needed," Marshall explains. The key is to increase these factors in order to create change.

"We know from research that we need these three factors at a minimum, but how do you get adults to be genuinely caring?" Marshall asks. "How do you get probation officers to be encouraging? How can masses of adults easily extend truly meaningful participation opportunities to disengaged children and youth? Doing authentic resilience work involves changing hearts and minds," says Marshall. "When professionals aren't at their best and don't know how to stay there in times of change and budget cuts, how can they possibly bring out the best in kids?"

NRRC training programs are making inroads by teaching that participants create their experience of an event with their own thinking. Focus groups reveal that when NRRC does trainings, the outcomes are impressive and last over time. People become hopeful when they realize that they are not victims of life events, but creators of their own reality. When people learn to tap wisdom within, they see and do things in new ways, with less discomfort and stress. They become confident that they have the common sense to know what to do in difficult situations. People also become more reflective, develop an increased sense of well-being, have improved relationships with others, and report greater satisfaction in the workplace or neighborhood.

Her own resilience

During her time at the University, Marshall has experienced many life changes, including the sudden death of her spouse, an empty nest, and complete loss of program funding all in one six-month period. "It was a time when what I was learning and teaching really paid off. Ten years later I know there is nothing too hard in life that each one of us does not have the ability to meet with common sense and grace. The principles of Health Realization coupled with resilience and other research teach us how we can navigate life successfully from the inside out. Without that understanding all the programs and services in the world would not make a dent.

"It's hard to believe I have had the opportunity to be a part of people's life changing processes," she says. As she matures, she believes her work continues to become more and more refined. "I find that this is the best work of my life. There is always one more way to grow." Most recently she co-developed a course for the Center for Spirituality and Healing called, "Spirituality and Resilience" and wrote *Parenting with Heart*. As always, her work continues to come from the inside, and radiates outward.