A RECIPE FOR EMPOWERMENT

CHEF JELANI NICHOLS AND MOTIVATING THE TEEN SPIRIT ARE HELPING TEENS FALL IN LOVE—WITH THEMSELVES

BY MALLORY HERRMANN
When Jelani Nichols was growing up, he thought he might become a firefighter or an astronaut. He has always been drawn to helping people, finding new experiences, creating joy—and, most of all, seeing what he can do to better someone else’s day.

While his childhood career goals didn’t pan out, he couldn’t be happier with what he’s doing now. At just 25, Nichols has recently stepped into the role of director for Motivating the Teen Spirit (MTS), a more than 20-year-old nonprofit organization founded by his mother, powerhouse motivational speaker and coach Lisa Nichols, to empower teens.

MTS works with teens (and their parents) through one-of-a-kind workshops and weekend sessions. With a focus on developing effective communication skills and cultivating self-respect and appreciation, MTS is on a mission to help teens fall in love with themselves. Even in an era of increased awareness of the value of self-care, that’s a message a lot of teens may not be familiar with or encouraged to seriously embrace.

To change that, MTS is helping teens of all races, religions, and socioeconomic backgrounds—especially those who are part of vulnerable communities—learn how to make integrity-based decisions that enable them to create healthier and happier lives.

“We want to give teens the tools they need to get through everyday life,” Nichols says, whether that’s navigating how to deal with finances, family, loss, school, trauma, or other issues.

**CREATING A NEW UNDERSTANDING**

Nichols participated in the MTS program himself as a teen, and it wasn’t long before he began facilitating sessions, sharing his stories with peers and younger teens attending the workshops. Each MTS event is an interactive, rather than lecture-based, workshop that combines small group conversations and exercises in self-discovery.

With a focus on creating a judgment-free safe space for participants, the workshops offer an opportunity for teens to process and understand their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors as well as how they can take action to increase their success. Nichols says MTS facilitators strive to pair students with participants who are strangers to them, rather than friends or acquaintances, because it helps them practice removing their masks and being open and honest about their experiences and feelings.

Similarly, MTS acknowledges that it can be hard to share fully when a parent is in the room. For that reason, participants are given the chance to decide for themselves whether they want their parents or guardians to attend the workshop as well. If the student isn’t comfortable having their parent in the room, or if the parent chooses not to attend, MTS has begun offering separate workshops in another room designed explicitly for parents and guardians.

Parent involvement in the programming wasn’t always part of MTS’s plan, Nichols explains. However, when the teen-only workshops offered participants a new vocabulary for how to process and make sense of their thoughts and feelings, those teens would go home speaking a new language and their parents felt lost. Many seemed to need a translator to make sense of what their kids were going through, and so the idea for a complementary parent workshop was born.

That’s not the only opportunity for adults, of course. Motivating the Masses, MTS’s for-profit parent company (also founded by Lisa Nichols), is similarly on a mission to empower communities through transformational training and events programming.

**THE TOTAL TRUTH PROCESS**

Kids typically find MTS through their school or church, when those organizations host events. Nichols admits that at early events, parents more or less had to drag their kids to the workshops. The teens may have been leaving the event excited about their new set of tools for communicating and making decisions, but they weren’t exactly eager to be there at the beginning of the day. Now, he says, teens are the ones signing up to participate and are taking a more active role in attending the sessions. The experience can change their lives.
"After my very first MTS event, I opened up to my mom on the freeway driving home in the pouring rain about not wanting to be on this Earth," remembers Allie Weeks, now 21, of Los Angeles. Eight years later, she is married with a daughter and in college, with goals to become a doctor. “I never thought I would see this day, let alone a high school diploma,” she says, adding that the tools and skills the program taught her continue to be relevant and helpful. She’s even passing them on. “I personally give a little bit of MTS to everyone who will listen,” she says, "because this place is a miracle. It's life-changing, life-saving. I am living proof.”

The heart of the MTS mission is teaching effective communication and showing participants what that actually looks like—and for good reason. Nichols says communication is the basis of 98 percent of the issues they see teens grappling with. At MTS, they work on the Total Truth Process, which involves breaking down emotions and examining them. This helps the teens realize, for instance, that anger isn’t just anger. Anger can also hold hurt, resentment, and maybe even sadness. Analyzing emotions this way can help teens make sense of them and manage them more effectively. It helps illustrate how much power words have and offers a chance to consider the impact language (and communication) has on how we feel and how we relate to others.

FOLLOWING HIS PASSION

Nichols was named the new director of Motivating the Teen Spirit in 2019, after serving as a facilitator for about seven years. When the position opened up, it felt like the right opportunity at the right time for someone who believes in the mission and has seen its impact firsthand. In addition to the typical responsibilities you might expect of an organization’s director (including managing day-to-day operations and overseeing the finances), Nichols is working on a tremendous expansion of the MTS workshop model.

With its headquarters in San Diego, California, the MTS program has been primarily administered at its own site or in schools, juvenile justice systems, and faith-based groups in California. While MTS has begun facilitating events around the country, Nichols hopes to expand the organization’s capacity throughout the next several years. After all, he admits, it’s a lot easier (and cheaper) for MTS to send one facilitator to the East Coast than it would be to bring a group of 50 teens, teachers, and parents to San Diego.

One of the biggest hurdles the organization faces in taking MTS out of state is having enough trained facilitators to run the workshops. With just three full-time facilitators currently on the MTS team, they have limited flexibility
for reaching the number of teens they would like to connect with. Also, adding facilitators isn't always a quick process. Nichols says MTS is very mindful of who gets involved due to the nature of the work and the vulnerability of their teens. However, the future is all about taking the message to more people, Nichols says, speaking with certainty that it's only a matter of time before the number of their annual events can be scaled up accordingly.

As director, he says it has been incredible to realize just how much interest there is in bringing MTS to more groups, a need he simply didn't realize existed when he was working as a facilitator. In fact, there's a waiting list even though MTS already has 11 events scheduled for this year. However, to reach those goals, plenty of work awaits behind the scenes. With systems and processes that were built at the organization's founding in 1998, Nichols is eager to reinvent the systems of operations, to update and streamline the framework behind MTS to help ensure their ambitious plan to grow has a solid foundation. He's also excited to launch an online meet-up event this summer that will be part alumni reunion and part think tank to get input and feedback from some of the 250,000 teens and young adults who have been through the program.

BRINGING PEOPLE TOGETHER

Nichols's passion for bringing communities together is not just about teen spirit. He is also known as Chef Jay, a professional chef who loves creating new and exciting culinary experiences for people. He still caters on the side and hopes to own a food truck in the next couple of years. Of course, it wouldn't be just any food truck. Nichols has been inspired by nonprofit food trucks that support homeless and vulnerable communities, and he sees owning a food truck as an opportunity to involve MTS participants. Having seen students grapple with the journey toward adulthood, he wants MTS to help them get work experience or training and find a solid trade to pursue.

What MTS is doing is working. Each participant is invited to complete an anonymous survey on-site at the end of the workshop, and many of those surveys show just how great the impact can be. Nichols says MTS has helped prevent 8,500 suicides, based on the number of teens who indicated that they had contemplated suicide prior to the event and who were either no longer considering that an option or were ready to seek help with suicidal thoughts or ideation. This accomplishment is even more poignant, notes Nichols, when you consider that according to the Centers for Disease Control, suicide is the second leading cause of death for teens and young adults. Nichols adds that the key to MTS's success here is the super-deep trust it fosters among participants.

"It's the right people in the right place at the right time," Nichols says. Teens are assured that they are not alone—that there is always someone who they can reach out to—and that the sense of community they've found with MTS can be their home away from home.

"There's no judgment, no repercussions," Nichols says. "Just unconditional love."