Scarlett Lewis is the founder and chief movement officer of the Jesse Lewis Choosing Love Movement, a nonprofit organization that she founded in 2013, following the murder of her six-year-old, alongside 19 of his classmates and 6 educators at Sandy Hook (Conn.) Elementary School in 2012. Lt. General (ret.) Martin Steele is the chairman of her board. He served in the Marine Corps for more than 34 years, including two tours of duty in Vietnam and the first Gulf War. The movement has attracted major attention from the national media and White House, among others. Its social and emotional learning program has been downloaded in all 50 states and over 55 countries since its launch less than two years ago. It is an inspiring example of the positive results that can occur in the wake of ongoing school tragedies like the ones at Marjory Stoneman Douglas, Sandy Hook, and Columbine.

Origins

Lewis: I knew following Jesse’s murder, I had to be part of the solution and that there wasn’t someone who was going to step in and “fix this.” I started researching what I could do to prevent another tragedy as well as to address the increasing substance abuse, mental illness, and incarceration issues our nation faces. My research led me to social and emotional learning (SEL), which so closely reflected the words that Jesse wrote on our kitchen chalkboard shortly before his murder: “Nurturing, healing love.”

I understood the tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary happened as a result of years of the shooter’s anger, isolation, and neglect. Nothing ever happens with a “snap.” That is why one of our main tenets is that, although we can’t always choose what happens to us, we can always choose how to respond. This is how we take our personal power back. Children can learn to choose a loving thought over an angry one. When children realize they have the power to positively impact themselves, as well as those around them, it is empowering and perpetuates their positive actions and interactions. Bottom line, choosing love feels good; anger, hatred, and resentment feel bad.

Steele: I have known Scarlett’s father since we were five years old. I was on the phone with him when Jesse was still considered missing in the school. I was on the plane to Newtown the next day. During the funeral, Scarlett was filled with spirituality, grace, and forgiveness.
I was the first member of her board, but my roots in this work go much deeper, back to when I was a child in Fayetteville, Arkansas, which was the first southern community to integrate after Brown v. Board of Education in 1954—a place of tolerance in a sea of racism, hatred, and bigotry. In my experience, the military understands the importance of relationships, teamwork, and love. When placed in harm's way, your potential for success is impacted by the love and trust you have established with the person on your left and the person on your right.

Discovering SEL

**Lewis:** I reached out to a professor, Dr. Chris Kukk, the Director of the Compassion Creativity and Innovation Center at Western Connecticut State University. He told me about SEL and the decades of research showing how programs such as these help kids learn the skills to have healthy relationships, be connected, be resilient, manage their emotions, and more. I was stunned by the outcomes—increases in grades, test scores, graduation rates, and reductions in bullying, mental health problems, anger/violence, incarceration, and more. I wondered why these programs weren’t in front of every child.

In fact, the Sandy Hook Advisory Commission Report that came out two years after the tragedy recommended three things to prevent this from happening again: gun safety, more access to mental health services, and SEL.

**Steele:** I didn’t know the terminology, but have been practicing this and living by SEL’s principles my whole life, dating back to Fayetteville, where I was called out for captaining teams that had black teammates.

I have four core values, the last of which is “build off each other’s strengths rather than attack other’s weaknesses.” Success is about having emotional intelligence and relationship building. That’s the common bond in the military: learning to love one another, respect each other, rely on each other.

One of my jobs as a Major General was to serve as strategic planning and policy officer in the Asia Pacific region. Spending time in many of the 44 countries, you learn to recognize, respect, and appreciate huge cultural differences and how people think and act differently. That’s part of SEL, too.

Teaching SEL

**Lewis:** In studying the epidemic of bullying, violence, and mental health issues, I found...
much of our existing programming is reactive, focused on the negative, such as substance abuse and bullying. We need to focus our efforts on proactive prevention. Until we dedicate at least one-quarter of our resources in this regard, we’ll never get ahead of these issues.

Social and emotional skills and tools are not innate. We aren’t born with them. There’s no mass murderer gene either. We need to be taught positive skills and tools, including adults. When I started learning about SEL, I realized I needed to brush up on these core competencies myself!

I’ve had an epiphany in the last five years. There are two kinds of people in this world: good people and good people in pain like Adam Lanza [the shooter in Newtown]. This is a hopeful statement because we can all do something to help ease another’s pain. SEL teaches us how to do this.

**Steele:** Since I retired from the Marine Corps in 1999, I’ve been focused on helping veterans transition to civilian jobs and life. It always starts with self-awareness, knowing yourself, what you value, being aware of differences, and how to deal with anger, fear, and hatred. Asking “Who am I and what is my role in the world order?”

“**I’d never heard of SEL. Many of the parents and children I speak with during my travels haven’t either.... But when I explain it, without fail they say, ‘We absolutely need this in our schools.’**” —Scarlett Lewis

**The response**

**Lewis:** Five years ago, as a parent of two boys, I’d never heard of SEL. Many of the parents and children I speak with during my travels haven’t either, and don’t understand the immense benefits. But when I explain it, without fail they say, “We absolutely need this in our schools.”

**Steele:** I’ve been working with the University of Arkansas, and when I talk to students, they get it. They yearn for it. But until we require teaching candidates to be certified in SEL as part of granting them a degree, we’ll just be pulling at the margins. We need to mainstream SEL by making it part of the education school curriculum. Also, in my leadership consulting work with corporations, their leaders almost always say their greatest weakness is, “I don’t work well with people who are significantly different than I am.” They need to understand themselves more and listen more. We are all the same in wanting and needing to love, and to be loved.

**Overcoming barriers**

**Lewis:** People don’t value what they don’t have or don’t understand. In doing this work, I realized I didn’t have social and emotional skills and tools either. Adults need to address our own issues. Teachers are overworked and underpaid. There’s very little in-service training on these challenges. I understood the necessity to create a program that allows us to learn alongside the students.

**Steele:** I’m frustrated that SEL hasn’t expanded more. Part of it is that, as a society, we are just catching up—realizing that success is not about IQ but about relationships,
emotional intelligence, team-building, and collaboration. This work is the answer. There’s no viable alternative. Part of the challenge is that a lot of adults just don’t want to come to grips with themselves to do the introspection, to confront their own demons and problems. When people learn that I’m a Marine three-star General doing this work, it takes some of them aback. But if not me, who? If not now, when? This is the solution to so much suffering, and we know that it is in the best interests of all children for their futures and the future of our society.

**Importance of youth voice and school leadership**

*Lewis:* The students from Parkland, Florida, show us that one person, regardless of age, can make a difference. We can choose how we respond to these tragedies and thus learn from them and make courageous choices to proactively prevent them moving forward. We must all take responsibility for what is happening in our world and to our children, and be the change we wish to see ourselves. We model behaviors for our children, but sometimes we haven’t learned these skills and tools as adults. That is why we created the Choose Love program.

Love is what connects us all as human beings. A lot of what we are experiencing is simply, at its core, lack of love. The empowering lesson is that love is a choice. The ultimate courage is to have the skills and tools to choose gratitude, forgiveness, and compassion in action, or, in other words, to choose love. SEL provides the values and skills we need to make the world a safer, more peaceful, and loving place.

**Focus on assets and growth**

*Lewis:* We have a negative bias in our society where we focus on the negative. That is how we have passed down our genes, but there are no more saber-toothed tigers to frighten us. This has translated into some of the programming in our schools that has not been effective in reducing substance abuse and mental health issues.

For example, almost everyone has heard of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The vast majority of us, however, experience something called post-traumatic growth (PTG) following difficulty or trauma. This is when we are strengthened through our experience and learn valuable lessons that translate into personal growth. When I ask my audiences, most people have never heard of PTG, but we know when we are aware of something, we experience the benefits exponentially.

I have dedicated my life to making sure that every child has access to what we know is in their best interest—social and emotional learning. Healthy relationships are the key to happiness. We have to teach our children the skills and tools necessary to achieve this.
RESOURCES

Click here to learn more about the free, comprehensive Choose Love SEL program.

Scarlett Lewis also is available to answer questions about implementing the program at Scarlett@jesselewiscooselove.org.

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