



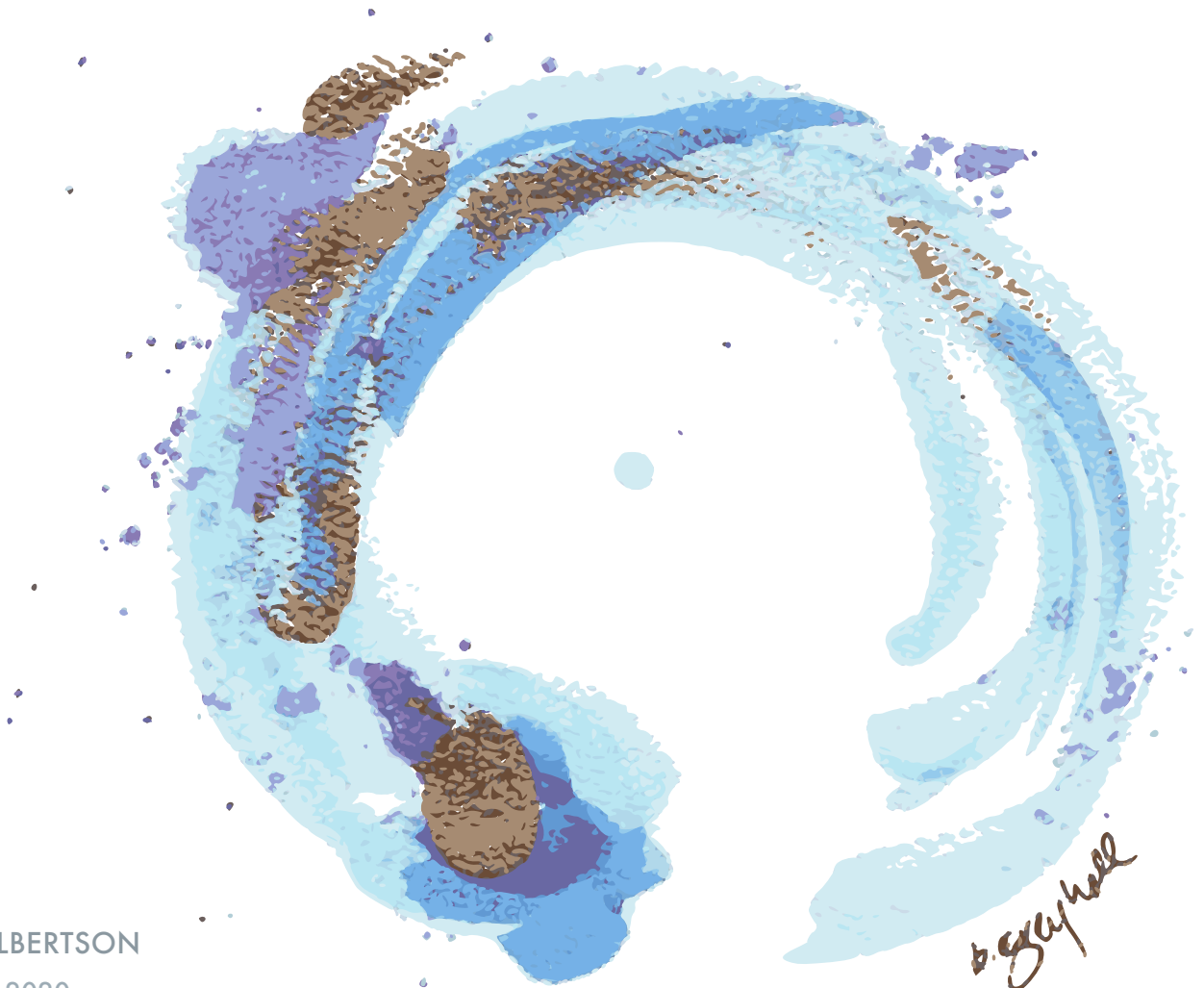
COMMUNITY FOR CHANGE



*Featured Organizations: MukkaMaar*

# MUKKAMAAR MEETS JOY

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LAUREN CULBERTSON

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[cvcommunityforchange.org](http://cvcommunityforchange.org)

Artist: Grey Hall Borneman



# MukkaMaar Meets Joy

*The core design ideas of the Community for Change are joy, non-obligation, and passion matching. But perhaps it all boils down to unleashing joy.*

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## JOY AND BEING BELIEVED

A quote that has been on my mind a lot recently – and that I have brought into some Community for Change gatherings – is the following (from the organization, The People’s Supper, that equips people to host small dinner parties as a space for connection and healing):

**“Social change moves at the speed of relationships. Relationships move at the speed of trust.”**

When I think about the definition of community (perhaps in lieu of “relationships” above) – which is something we do a lot at the Community for Change – deep trust is always a required quality. Whether said community is strangers helping one another in the aftermath of a natural disaster, or a community that has been in existence for much longer, such as Maria Souza’s friends from when she started dancing ballet thirty years ago – I have wondered if communities form with perhaps the unspoken yet shared belief that each person has the others’ best interest in mind. As our other friend, Kourosh Houshmand, said at one of our Advancing Dinners last week, he felt a sense of community with the person sitting next to him once the two of them started to disclose perhaps more personal details about their lives that required a level of trust that the other would “protect,” as Kourosh said, those details.

To say the above quote in reverse, trust is the building blocks of relationships. Relationships are the building blocks of change.

The more I travel, talk to people, follow domestic and international politics, study business and investing as a vehicle for social change...the more I am convinced that change will not happen once a law changes, or someone new is elected, or some new technology is brought to market. Will these things spur change? Yes, but I think at a pretty superficial level. Lasting change starts with changes in the heart, in communities where there is vulnerability, trust, and a deep sense of belonging.

What does this look like in practice?



## *Featured Organizations: MukkaMaar*

In November, I had the privilege to travel to Mumbai to visit a few different nonprofits that are part of the incubator N Core, of which our friend Lan Lakshminarayana is an advisor. My first day there was spent with an organization called MukkaMaar, which in Hindi means “throw a punch,” and their Founder Ishita Sharma. MukkaMaar partners with public schools to teach martial arts and self-defense to middle school aged girls.

Writing about how joy runs through some of our nonprofit partners has not been an easy task – a nonprofit exists because humans are imperfect and cause real suffering in the world that markets and systems cannot address alone. Still, I think writing about how joy is seen in MukkaMaar has been the hardest to write about yet. Not because I didn’t witness joy during my visit – on the contrary, just about every girl in a MukkaMaar class was smiling as they punched the air and threw their legs out in front of them, calling out together. But at the same time, I knew that most of those young girls had been the victim of or witnessed some kind of physical or emotional violence.

*According to the UN, 73% of women in India between the ages of 15-49 report feeling unsafe and 22% of women have experienced physical or sexual violence within the last 12 months. For France, that latter statistic is 5%.*

Therefore, the impact of MukkaMaar is twofold. Living in a highly patriarchal society, young girls aren’t encouraged to play or run around like most boys their age, even though UNICEF advocates that exercise is good for both their bodies and their minds. But perhaps more importantly, the girls are learning how to protect themselves if attacked by a man...which is really a matter of “when,” and not “if” for their life in Mumbai.

Which begs the question...

*What does it mean to find joy as a young girl growing up in – by some resources – the worst country in the world to be a woman?*

Within my first 24 hours in Mumbai, I was stood in the front of square concrete room, listening to the synchronized chanting of about 40 Indian school girls echo off the walls. They stood in four rows organized by shirt color – red, blue, green, or yellow. Most had long dark braids and beaded anklets that jingled. They were between the ages of 11 and 16, but some girls in the front row looked like they could be as young as 8.

They held their fists up, ready to fight, kicking their legs in unison with their peers. As they are learning different punches and kicks, instructors often stopped them to review the nuances of a maneuver. Remember, this isn’t a matter of just getting stronger...if they are going to use this to protect themselves in a crisis, they have to learn how to do it correctly and effectively. While they have the attention of the entire class, instructors will also discuss topics such as what is



## *Featured Organizations: MukkaMaar*

inappropriate for a man to do to their bodies, who to talk to if they are in an abusive situation, and what their rights are. They affirm to the girls that they are strong, have immeasurable worth, and are capable of doing big things on their own. If a girl discloses in class that she had used the techniques learned in order to escape or stop an act of violence, the rest of the class claps with a standing ovation to commemorate the bravery of her act and her voice.

I think that visual of the girls in their class will stay with me for the rest of my life. Before visiting Mumbai, when I thought of India, I would immediately think of violence against women. I would think of the 23 year old girl who was horrifically gang raped in Delhi in 2012, “Delhi’s Daughter,” on a bus and left to die, setting off a chain reaction of protests across the country and unveiling to the world a reality of Indian women’s daily life to...the inability to take a bus to see a movie without the fear of being, at best, harassed, and at worst, murdered by a man. In graduate school, I did research on the correlation between access to toilet facilities and gender-based violence– in my literature review, an overwhelming majority of research on the topic was coming from India. Why? Because there is a lot to be said about women who don’t even feel like they are safe enough to use the bathroom at night. When I thought of India, I thought of the oppression perpetrated against women. And then to see the youngest generation becoming equipped and empowered to protect themselves? Hope is a word that comes to mind.

But still, the precise moment that stands out the most in my mind was when, as the girls filed out of the classroom to go home for the evening, one small girl stayed behind and whispered with Ishita in Hindi, Ishita kneeling down to her level.

Ishita told me on the car ride later that this girl had divulged that her uncle, who lived in her home, was sexually abusing her.

This was a big deal. Not so much the situation that was being disclosed, but rather the act of this girl disclosing it in the first place. Above I gave the statistic of how many women in India have experienced physical violence.

*But some suspect that only 1/100 cases of sexual violence actually are reported in the country.*

This is because women and girls often don’t think they’ll be taken seriously, or that anything will be done to stop their abusers. Or that they will be shamed. I heard some stories of girls who had come forward to their own mothers about being a victim, and they are not believed. There is a complex web of culture, history, and power structures in India. When it comes to the darker parts of this, women and girls are disproportionately affected. A patriarchal society and an environment of victim-blaming have the effect of silencing those abused.

But Ishita and the trainers employed by MukkaMaar work hard to build relationships of trust



## Featured Organizations: MukkaMaar

with the girls they see every week. They become their friends, their biggest advocates. The girl who came up to Ishita after the class trusted that Ishita would not judge or shame her, would know the appropriate course of action to take, and, perhaps most importantly, knew that Ishita would *believe her*.

MukkaMaar taught me that there is a real joy in being believed, because *being believed is essentially the same as being seen*.

The famous development economist, Amartya Sen, has what he calls “the missing women theory,” of which India is a classic case study. The theory says that the demographic data we have doesn’t add up when it comes to gender, and that in some parts of the world, the gender ratio is unnaturally skewed towards men due to sex selective abortion, infanticide, and violence against women in societies that place more value on men. *Girls and women are literally being erased from history – either through death or removing their agency and voice while living*.

American civil rights activist, Ruby Sales, talks about learning to ask the question of “*where does it hurt?*” to get to the heart of the matter of many of our questions that plague public life. This pain – whether in America or India – is often an outcome of things unseen. It often happens with no witnesses, behind closed doors, or maybe on a bus in Delhi, between two people. *To say, “I don’t believe you” is to say “your pain is invisible”...which is to say “you don’t belong here.”*

Ishita and message on WhatsApp from time to time and last week she shared a story with me (and gave me the permission to share with you). The night prior, a girl about 9-years-old had approached her trying to sell her tissues. Ishita, after gently reminding the girl that she should be focusing on her schoolwork instead, struck up a conversation and soon learned that this girl had an older sister that was in the MukkaMaar class offered at her school. She proceeded to show Ishita some of the punches her sister had learned from MukkaMaar and then taught her. Ishita texted me:

*“I have no words to express what I felt. It’s true what they say, when you educate a girl, she uplifts the whole family! I can’t wait to see a time where every girl we ‘bump’ into, knows that she is safe!”*

In a democratic country that may on paper recognize the personhood of girls and say “I see you,” but in reality falls quite short, Ishita and the entire MukkaMaar team are effectively asking the 300 girls they work with “where does it hurt?” and they take their answers as the truth. They are building a community of powerful fighters – some only four feet tall – that belong and that are full of joy. A community that is quickly growing, but no matter how large it gets, no girl will be invisible, no girl will be silent.

