

Empowering High School Students

An Interview with Shannon Mabrey Rotenberg, Executive Director, and Erica Helwick Doyle, Managing Director, just keep livin Foundation

EDITORS' NOTE Shannon Rotenberg started her career with nonprofit organizations and the entertainment industry while at Creative Artists Agency, a talent and sports agency based in Los Angeles. She was a program director in their philanthropic division for six years before helping to launch the just keep livin (JKL) Foundation. Rotenberg serves on the boards of Angels for Baby2Baby and Dak Prescott's Faith Fight Finish Foundation, whose mission is to invest in a better future by empowering individuals, families and communities to find strength through adversity. She works with the Harold Robinson Foundation which is committed to providing impoverished children with camp retreats which are designed to strengthen confidence, independence, build character and develop leadership skills. Rotenberg was also the founding-chair of "Kidstock," an event that benefitted One Voice's Scholarship Program in Los Angeles. She serves on a committee of LA women for Giffords, the organization led by congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords that seeks to save lives from gun violence and make communities safer. Rotenberg is a member of the LA Women's Collective, a political action committee that empowers women in Los Angeles to influence political and legislative progress. In addition, she consults with several other nonprofits, and has recently been working with Represent Justice to change the narrative around incarceration, specifically concentrating on the Julius Jones case in Oklahoma. Rotenberg is a graduate of the University of Oklahoma.

As the Managing Director for the just keep livin Foundation, Erica Doyle is tasked with managing fundraising events, business development, donor relations, marketing, and corporate partnerships for the organization. Prior to joining JKL, she worked in Celebrity Relations for City of Hope, a cancer hospital and research center based in Los Angeles. In addition to nonprofit work, Doyle has an extensive background in the entertainment industry, beginning her career as an assistant to a film agent at Creative Artists Agency. After CAA, she spent time working in film development at Universal Pictures prior to joining the West Coast Bureau of InStyle Magazine, where she helped manage talent bookings while also contributing to the magazine as a writer and reporter. Doyle is a graduate of Northwestern University.

FOUNDATION BRIEF The just keep livin Foundation (jklivinfoundation.org) was founded by Camila and Matthew McConaughey with the mission to empower high school students by



Shannon Mabrey Rotenberg



Erica Helwick Doyle

providing them with the tools to lead active lives and make healthy choices for a better future. The Foundation is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that implements after-school fitness programs in 40 inner city high schools/sites. Through its programs, the Foundation encourages students to make positive life choices that improve their physical and mental health through exercise, teamwork, gratitude, nutrition, and community service.

Will you discuss Matthew and Camila's passion and commitment for the work of the just keep livin Foundation and how deeply engaged they are in its efforts?

Rotenberg: Matthew and Camila are genuinely passionate about just keep livin, and when they commit to something, they give their all. The very first time I met with Matthew to talk about launching the Foundation, I remember he already had pages and pages of ideas written down in a notebook. He and Camila did their research and were directly involved in everything right from the start, from the creation of the curriculum to our monthly inspirational quotes and how we end every session with a gratitude circle. From day one, their desire was to "do the work" and all these years later, they're still doing the work; always willing to pick up the phone and call whomever necessary to help the Foundation or our kids in the program. They aren't the type to seek recognition for all the amazing work they do behind the scenes, but, for example, they



JKL Foundation team (from left to right: Kelly Mickel, Shannon Rotenberg, Matthew McConaughey, Camila McConaughey, Leon Clayborne, Erica Doyle, Jenny Rizzo) at the JKL Foundation annual fundraiser, "Mack, Jack & McConaughey" in April 2016

“As parents, teachers, mentors and leaders, I believe that building better people is the path to true progress. With an aim to prevent before we need to cure, that starts with our youth. With the just keep livin Foundation, we wanted to create an all-inclusive, incentive-based curriculum to help students find the right path and give them the tools to live healthier lives – mind, body and soul.”

Matthew McConaughey

went out of their way during the pandemic to make sure that we were able to augment our program and offer even more support to our JKL kids. Matthew was paid to do a number of corporate speaking engagements over Zoom during COVID, and he chose to donate his speaking fees directly to the Foundation to ensure that we did not let our kids down in their time of need. When Mother’s Day rolled around, Camila made sure to offer up words of inspiration and even send gifts to several of our JKL moms. Their hearts and devotion never cease to amaze me.

Did you always know that you had a passion for this type of work and what makes the work so special for you?

Rotenberg: Looking back, I believe I started down the path to finding my calling at a very young age. When I was growing up, I went to school in a very low-income area. I witnessed the daily struggles that many families endure, and saw firsthand that there are some kids who maybe don’t make the sports team or play in the band and really struggled to find a place to fit in during a critical time of development. I knew even then that I wanted to work with kids, helping to provide them a sense of support. I actually got my credentials to teach before I was blessed to find a job that merged all the worlds for me. It’s always been my passion to help kids who don’t have resources, and it’s endlessly rewarding to see what a difference this program makes in so many young lives.

Doyle: Giving back, in one form or another, has always been a big priority in my life. I’ve been volunteering in some capacity since I was a kid, and it’s always fed my soul in a way that nothing else has. It took me some time to figure out how to make a career out of it, though. I started off in the entertainment industry, nurturing my passion for helping others through Saturday mornings spent as a

Child Life volunteer at UCLA Mattel Children’s Hospital. When I was eventually able to find work that combined my professional background with my philanthropic ambitions, I felt like I’d hit the jackpot. I’m such a believer in our work at the just keep livin Foundation, having personally witnessed our program transform these kids and enrich their lives. Whether it’s seeing our students’ faces light up after they’ve completed the high ropes course at our sleepaway camp, or watching them comfort one another after opening up at one

of our “Gratitude Circles,” each day in this job gives me something to be grateful for. It’s an honor to help realize Matthew and Camila’s vision and to play a role in helping shape these incredible young people’s futures.

Will you highlight the history of the just keep livin Foundation and how you define its mission?

Matthew and Camila McConaughey established the just keep livin Foundation in 2006, with the goal of empowering high school students by providing them with the tools to lead active



Matthew and Camila McConaughey with JKL students in Austin before a private Star Wars screening in Jan 2020

“Besides simply providing youth from underserved communities a safe place to go after school, our program also teaches them life skills, including the value of not only setting goals, but of achieving them. Our students learn resilience, social responsibility, courage, and self-reliance, as well as the joy and dignity that serving others can give, not only to the served, but to them as servants. At the just keep livin Foundation, we also believe in the reciprocity of gratitude: the more thankful we are, the more we create in life to be thankful for. So, in the meantime and all times, just keep livin.”

Matthew McConaughey

lives and make healthy choices for a better future. Matthew had reached a point in his career where he was being asked to support lots of different charities and causes, and, while they were all worthy endeavors, he and Camila felt like they could have a greater impact if they decided to go deep, rather than wide, in terms of giving back. Using their access and resources, they wanted to create an incentive-based program to help kids at underserved schools, starting at that pivotal time of 9th grade when students are old enough to be coming into independence and making choices for themselves, but also young enough to adjust their path if they're headed down the wrong one. The just keep living program utilizes a whole-student approach that empowers youth to live better and healthier lives beginning with exercise and nutrition and carried forward with gratitude and community service. At a critical age, the program gives them life skills critical to building a happy and healthy future that are not often offered as part of the traditional high school curriculum. Studies have shown, for example, that Social Emotional Learning (SEL), which helps students learn how to regulate their emotions and become more socially aware and responsible, is an even greater predictor of lifelong success than

academic grades. The JKL program is powerful medicine that holds the capacity to change the course of a life.

Will you provide an overview of the just keep livin Foundation's work and initiatives?

The just keep livin Foundation implements after school fitness programs in 40 inner-city high schools throughout 14 cities nationwide. In our programs, we encourage students to make positive life choices that improve their physical and mental health through exercise, teamwork, gratitude, nutrition, and community service. We offer an all-inclusive approach through a curriculum that we created with Scholastic, and we hire teachers from the schools we are in to run the programs on the ground. Our goal is really to prevent before we have to cure by helping students to establish good habits that will serve them well throughout their lives. Every time we have a guest speaker, for example, we have our students write thank you notes. It's often the first time they've ever done it, and it's a practice that could potentially help them land a job later in life. The program gives participating students a safe place to enhance their lives with fitness coaches and health experts. Participants get in shape and gain confidence while also improving their grades, attendance and behavior. Friendships are built and fears

are overcome. At our j.k. livin after school programs, kids learn self-reliance and get a healthy start today, so they can make a better tomorrow.

How did the just keep livin Foundation adapt the way it works to address the challenges caused by the global pandemic?

When COVID-19 hit and schools started to close, we immediately jumped into action by raising funds to provide the communities we serve with over 35,000 meals and 700 computers in order to help meet some of our students' most immediate needs. We then began holding online JKL programming – mostly through Zoom and Instagram Live – to help our students stay active and healthy, and to maintain a sense of community while they were isolated in their homes. We hosted yoga sessions, calisthenics workouts and virtual 5K runs, and came together online to learn how to cook healthy food at home on a low budget. We provided resources such as access to free online workouts, meditation playlists, and breathing videos. For our community service piece, we had students write thank you cards to first responders, send well wishes to nursing home residents, and even go door-to-door (safely) delivering Thanksgiving turkeys to their neighbors in need.

Probably our favorite program addition to come out of the pandemic, though, is our “Mental Health Mondays” series. We implemented this program – in which we host mental health professionals as virtual guest speakers – at the start of the 2020-2021 school year, and it has been so impactful that we’ve continued it even though all of our programs are back to meeting in-person. The idea behind “Mental Health Mondays” came about as a way for us to continue to provide a safe space to nurture our students’ emotional and overall well-being during a time when they were isolated from school, friends, and their normal routines. During these sessions, which are open to all JKL programs throughout the country, our featured experts provide our students with practical tools for managing stress and anxiety, and help for those battling depression. We’ve seen an amazing response from our community since we started providing this service, and “Mental Health Mondays” have become a key pillar in our curriculum.

How critical are metrics to measure the impact of the just keep livin Foundation’s work?

Some of our greatest accomplishments are in the data we’ve collected from our programs that proves the effectiveness of our work. We also consistently receive great testimonials from our students about how JKL really has changed their lives, and how grateful they are for the “firsts” they experience through our program – from camping to volunteering, from completing a marathon to writing their first thank you note, and many more. While those are important indicators of success, Matthew is a numbers guy, and he also likes to see the numbers and the science behind the work. We like to say that we have numbers to back up the “feel good” feedback and we believe that it’s so important to have both. In terms of hard data, we conduct student surveys at the beginning and end of each



Matthew McConaughey with JKL students at a Texas Rangers event in Dallas in March 2019

school year, we do pre- and post-Fitnessgram testing, we require weekly and monthly reports from our instructors, and we work with the schools we’re in to track things like GPA, attendance, behavioral issues, and graduation rates. Additionally, in 2019, we made an investment in the Social Emotional Learning (SEL) aspect of our curriculum, partnering with Scholastic to create supplemental curriculum to make sure we are addressing that need. We work with a data collection platform called Hello Insight to engage our students in surveys that specifically address SEL skills so that we can better hone our programming to honor these needs.

We’re proud to say our program is working:

- Fitness: 95 percent of JKL students get more exercise since joining the program
- Nutrition: 94 percent of JKL students make healthier choices since joining the program
- Graduation: 99 percent of 12th grade JKL students graduated in 2021
- Attendance: 93 percent improved or maintained their attendance
- Behavior: 99 percent improved their behavior
- Academics: 91 percent improved or maintained their grades

What are your priorities for the just keep livin Foundation as you look to the future?

We want to continue to grow and expand our programming, adding three to five programs each year while making sure to remain very hands-on in terms of the implementation of our curriculum and the relationships we have with our program instructors. We have been fortunate to have many wonderful like-minded partners come on as sponsors, but we are always looking for new sponsors to fund individual programs. We are growing the mental health component of our program through our “Mental Health Mondays,” and we will continue to tweak our curriculum as our students’ needs evolve. We would also love to expand our JKL Alumni program and possibly bring more of our graduates back to help mentor kids currently in our program. As always, we want to continue to provide the students we serve with critical life skills and encourage them to take what they learn into their own homes and share it with their families and their communities. ●



Matthew and Camila McConaughey with JKL students in February 2020 (from left to right: Yordis Barrios, Miriam Manzano, and Luis Sanchez)