



KINDNESS...IT'S WHAT WE DO.

I've always been challenged by Mark Twain's quote, "The man who does not read has no advantage over the man who cannot read." A huge part of teaching is inspiring our kids to do things they can do but may not want to do. The knowledge we're hoping our students discover and internalize is meaningless unless our students apply it. Knowledge, like sunscreen and deodorant, is meaningless unless it's applied. After years of teaching character education and social emotional learning lessons, our fifth-grade team realized we invest huge amounts of time talking about character education and social emotional learning, but seldom give kids the opportunity to practice and apply it in a controlled setting that intentionally sets them up to apply what they learn and succeed. Our students know the right answers in every bullying lesson but fail to put it into practice on the playground. Students need supervision and coaching when it comes to putting character education into practice, and so the fifth grade Kindness Crew was born. We wanted to expose our students to and teach them how to interact with people who were different. We wanted our fifth graders to become comfortable with feeling uncomfortable. We wanted our fifth graders to work with younger first grade students, autistic support students, and elderly residents from a neighboring assisted living center called The Bridges. And so, we created The Kindness Crew.

We developed a series of character education lessons using picture books to introduce 5th grade students to the core values that drive The Kindness Crew. We kick off the school year by reading the picture book *Phoeey* by Marc Rosenthal to the entire grade level. This picture book highlights how a negative attitude prevents people from seeing the amazing things going on around them. It sets up the point that attitude is everything.

Our grade level lesson for the second day of school builds on the idea of attitude. We read the picture book *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* by Judith Viorst. Alexander, the main character, struggles with a negative attitude throughout the entire

book. We then watch a short news story on Alex Scott which chronicles how a little girl started Alex's Lemonade Stand. Her amazing attitude never dimmed no matter how many difficult things came her way. We ask the students, "Which Alex will you be?" As a culminating activity, we hand out a few pieces of toilet paper to each student and have them write down all the things they hate about school. Their homework assignment is to go home and flush the list down the toilet. This simple act becomes an anchor point for the entire school year. Any complaints throughout the school year are met with a simple, "flush it."

The third day of school features the picture book, ***A Bad Case of Stripes*** by David Shannon. The book showcases a comical look at peer pressure when the main character Camilla loves lima beans but refuses to eat them because she's afraid others will make fun of her. We hand out a dried lima bean to each student and give them time to draw faces on the beans and name them. The students keep the lima beans in their desks throughout the school year as a reminder of standing strong against negative peer pressure.

Day four is when we officially introduce The Kindness Crew. We highlight the picture book, ***Uniquely Wired*** by Julia Cook, on the fourth day of school. The book is about a young boy living with autism and how he sees and processes the world around him. We invite an Autistic support teacher to come in and talk to our 5th graders about how to interact with Autistic support students at our school. We also invite the Director of The Bridges, a neighboring assisted living facility a few blocks from our school, to come in and talk to our 5th graders about how to interact with elderly residents with limited mobility and memory issues. We explain that each month, 5th graders will be visiting The Bridges to do a monthly activity with the residents, walking over each month to deliver birthday cards, a Hawaiian lei, and a spirited singing of Happy Birthday to each resident celebrating a birthday, pushing in to different Autistic Support classrooms to do an interactive art activity each month, and visiting first grade classrooms to help out as tutor buddies in math. The message is clear...Respecting others, now matter what their differences may be, is something we live out in 5th grade. Students are given the option of purchasing a Kindness Crew T-shirt, and we get to work the second week of school. Each activity and visit to The Bridges, an autistic support classroom, or first grade becomes a lesson in preparing our 5th graders to stand up for what's right and respect others no matter what differences exist.

Our first visit to The Bridges is a simple lemonade and cookies party where residents give our students a tour of The Bridges allowing students to introduce themselves.

<https://www.wevideo.com/view/3178454721>

Our second visit is a spirited game of Bingo in which the resident's faces are the Bingo squares. It's a great way for the kids to get to know the residents.

<https://www.wevideo.com/view/3190219592>

In October, we walk over and treat the residents to a Halloween Parade. In November we put on a low-budget play of the iconic elementary school picture book, Turkey Trouble. The

illustrator of the picture book, Lee Harper, happens to live in Bucks County, and he stopped by to say hello to the students and the residents!

<https://www.wevideo.com/view/3253296668>

In December, we adopt a handful of residents who don't have any family and help them decorate their rooms for the holidays. We set up and decorate a tiny Christmas tree and hang personalized stockings stuffed with little presents for them to open. We then do some holiday caroling. One of the most powerful experiences happened in memory care one December. A group of fifth graders started singing some holiday favorites and one resident stood up and started singing along. She knew the words to every song. When we started singing Rudolph the Red Nose Reindeer, she started dancing! As we were leaving her husband stopped me. He had tears running down his cheeks as he told me this was the first time he's seen his wife smile and sing in over two years. Many of the students had tears in their eyes as he thanked them visiting memory care.

<https://www.wevideo.com/view/3410846359>

We usually throw a Winter Olympics' color war in January consisting of several high-energy minute-to-win-it challenges.

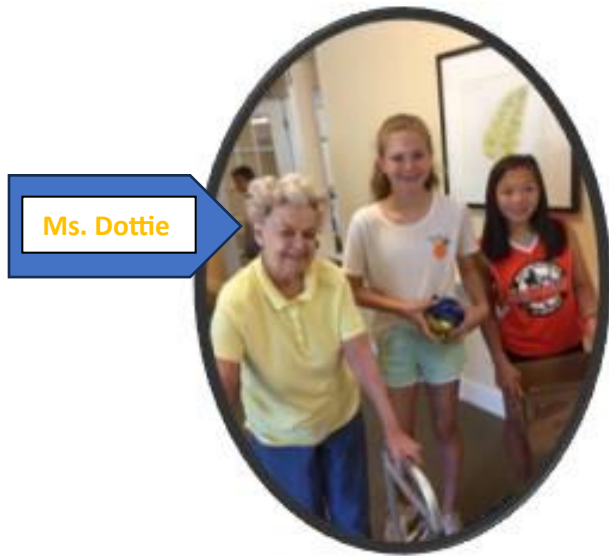
<https://www.wevideo.com/view/3320310653>

The Bridges throws a raucous and rowdy Memorial Day picnic in May. Our fifth graders get some training in how to serve others and act as waiters and waitresses. It's also the perfect time for students and residents to talk. <https://www.wevideo.com/view/3091148644>

One amazing story happened when some of our fifth graders met Mr. Don. The director of The Bridges told me to keep an eye on Mr. Don because he was the meanest resident they've every had. He screamed and cursed at the nurses on a daily basis and she wasn't sure how he was going to behave. I grabbed a popsicle and headed over to meet Mr. Don. I handed him the popsicle and asked him how these fifth graders were treating him. He started crying and told me they were the nicest and most amazing kids he's every met. He couldn't believe they were treating him so kindly.



Our most popular event at The Bridges is our Summer Carnival Kick-off. Our fifth graders create carnival games to help the residents kick summer off in style...<https://www.wevideo.com/view/2728974358> . My favorite story happened at one of our Summer Carnival Kick-offs. Dottie was determined to sink a beanbag at our cornhole station. A crowd of nurses and students were cheering her on. The activities director was crying as she watched Dottie playing a few rounds of cornhole. She turned to me and explained that Dottie had stopped eating and refused to come out of her room. They had tried everything, but she had just given up. When she heard all the laughter and fun from our Carnival Kick-off, Dottie came out of her room. The activities director explained that our kids had literally kept Dottie going and given her a reason to live.



Our work with autistic support classrooms is also inspiring. We work with fifth graders and teach them how to use Tinker cad and 3-D printers to make customized bubble wands for all the autistic support students. We then host a bubble blowing party and give each student a bouquet of bubble wands that we made just for them.

<https://www.wevideo.com/view/2728884195>

We know we're having a positive impact because people are telling us. Kim Sager, the director of The Bridges reports the following, *"The intergenerational relationship between the Bridges at Warwick and the Jamison 5th graders create smiles for all that are involved. The residents of the Bridges at Warwick are reminded of their children and grandchildren and all the wonderful times they had with them. For our residents with memory impairment they may not remember hours later why they are so happy, but the joy within their hearts is incredibly meaningful. The students from Jamison 5th grade show respect, kindness and a level of energy that is hard to contain. Our residents value the students visits so much that they postpone doctors appointments and family outings so as to not miss the kids visits!"* Many parents have emailed me to express what a difference they're seeing in the lives of their kids. One story stands out. I had the chance to talk to my homeroom mom at the end of the school year during our class party. She explained that a group of girls got together at her house to plan different things they wanted to do together over the

summer. She said she was shocked to hear them plan out weekly visits over the summer to go back and visit residents at The Bridges all on their own. She had tears in her eyes as she thanked me for teaching those girls how important it is to care about others. Another parent explained how her son and his friends asked for a ride to The Bridges on Christmas Eve so they could do some Christmas caroling. The most powerful story that sticks with me is about a fifth grader who was really emotional after our first visit to The Bridges. Her mom emailed me later that week to share the story. It turns out that this girl's grandma had just died six months ago. All of her grandparents had passed away. She went home after that first visit talking about Ms. Marge. Marge was a nurse in an elementary school in New York for 40 years. Marge doesn't have any kids. This fifth grader asked her mom if she could adopt Marge as a grandma. The mom encouraged her daughter to start writing her letters, and that's exactly what she did! We're also seeing a changes in our students at school. After challenging students to reach out to autistic students they see in the hall or younger students as well and say hello, I was thrilled to see several students put it into action. We were walking to Art and I was at the back of the line. Several students saw a young first grader walk by wearing a birthday crown. They stepped out of line, gave the student animated high fives and asked her several questions about her birthday. I watched that first grader walk away beaming. It was amazing to realize my students were seeing opportunities to reach out and connect to other students. It wasn't long after that birthday surprise that an Autistic support teacher stopped by my room to compliment some fifth graders. She had tears in her eyes as she recounted how many fifth graders stop and talk to autistic support students in the halls. She couldn't believe that our fifth graders know their names and genuinely take time to talk to them.

Those are just some of the stories from our Kindness Crew adventures. We've seen a huge change in how our students treat each other because of the lessons they've learned from working with the residents at The Bridges, Autistic support students, and first graders. I started with my favorite quote by Mark Twain and end with my favorite quote by Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson suggested, "What you *do* speaks so loudly I can't hear what you *say*." Kids say the right things during those character ed lessons, but amazing things happen when they're given the chance to apply what they know, *do* them, and live them out. Too often our teaching is reactive to student behavior. The Kindness Crew proves that proactively teaching students to stand up for what's right and respect other's differences can change not only the grade level, but the entire school and community.