

LEADERSHIP MAINE – DAMARISCOTTA CLASS (2022-2023)¹

PRACTICUM FINAL REPORT

Project Title: Greater Portland Acts of Kindness Initiative

Sponsor Organization: Acts of Kindness Maine (AOK Maine)

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Introduction:

As we reviewed the descriptions of the various project opportunities presented at the opening retreat at Camp Wavus in September 2023, the five members of our practicum team were instantly drawn to Acts of Kindness (AOK). Team members had certainly taken notice of recent societal shifts and were motivated by AOK's mission, "Acts of Kindness Maine (AOK Maine) is a startup non-profit that aims to transform the culture of communities throughout Maine, not only to counter the disturbing trends of toxic polarization in America, but also to mitigate the epidemic of loneliness, isolation, and disconnection increasingly felt in modern society".

Research and the Debate about the Need for Data

Our team read through a wide range of research materials, articles, and website content provided by our sponsors, as well as additional resources. We learned about school-based efforts, city or community wide efforts, workplace initiatives, the neuroscience of kindness, and the role of kindness in faith-based organizations.

In our examination of school-based curriculum packages, programs, and conversations with school leaders engaged in this work, we did learn that a combination of deliberate, focused education about kindness, combined with performing acts of kindness, and reflecting on kindness as both a giver and receiver, can lead to positive outcomes for students. Given that many schools are focusing on social-emotional learning (SEL), and that kindness curriculum and/or activities can be a key component of this work, we believe that this is one of the most promising avenues for increasing kindness locally. In particular, the LearnKind curriculum, for grades K-8, appears to be particularly promising.

Scientific experiments using functional MRI imaging have shown that acts of kindness stimulate the reward centers (the septal and ventral striatum) of the brain and damp down activity in the stress and fear center (the amygdala). In addition, acts of kindness promote the release of serotonin and oxytocin, two neurotransmitters associated with well-being and positivity. Psychological studies have shown that pro-social behavior like random acts of kindness increase happiness and decrease stress in both givers and receivers. Interestingly, givers uniformly underestimate the impact of their acts on the recipients because recipients benefit from both

¹ See Appendix for list of full Leadership Maine 2022-2023 cohort and practicum members.

the act itself and the feeling of warmth conveyed in a kind act. Finally, one study showed that random acts of kindness can increase well-being such that people who engage in this practice have a 44% lower chance of dying early, after correcting for all other contributing factors.

The data from Cleveland, which launched a city-wide kindness initiative in 2020, is harder to interpret. The initiative hoped to record 1,000,000 acts of kindness in one year, and even launched an app for citizens to track their acts of kindness. According to the organizers, 37 million acts were performed in the first year of the initiative, but they were tallying “bulk” kindness like blood donations (150,000), meals distributed by the greater Cleveland Food Bank (780,000) and every COVID shot administered at the free clinics in the city. In contrast, the active users of the “Kindland App” only numbered 898 during the same time period. There is significant debate, and quite frankly skepticism, that kindness initiatives can cure the very real challenges that our society is facing. Is it reasonable to think that kindness alone can reduce violent crime, combat racism and ameliorate poverty, without meaningful public policy intervention? And yet, what is the harm in trying?

This research, as well as our group conversations, led us to articulate the fundamental debate of our project: can the effects of acts of kindness be quantified, measured, and rigorously evaluated, or is it enough (or even preferable) to be satisfied with simply increasing the amount of positivity in the world? It is clear that acts of kindness benefit individuals, and it is likely that kindness initiatives and curricula in schools likewise have a positive effect. The effect of these initiatives on communities are much harder, if not impossible, to prove. However, a nonprofit dedicated to increasing kindness in a community may struggle to attract and continue to receive funding without quantifiable goals or metrics to report. And, there is the common sense viewpoint that the “case for kindness” doesn’t need to be proven. Society does not expect that organizations of faith quantify their benefit. After all, who could argue that everyone will not benefit from a little more kindness in their everyday life?

Eventually, we decided that if we performed some form of local acts of kindness ourselves, within Leadership Maine, and catalogued how those acts were received, then our needs and the needs of our sponsor would be met.

After refocusing, the team coalesced around a plan to present personal hand-written thank-you notes (along with some sweet treats) to our fellow classmates expressing how each of them had positively affected the collective experience of Leadership Maine. We then asked each participant to keep acts of kindness in mind over the following month and provide any feedback on the impact of our act of kindness on them or any other acts they observed or in which they participated.

We received a uniformly positive response from the participants who answered our survey. Everyone agreed that they were surprised and touched by the unexpected small gifts. They stated that it was a great experience and a reminder that kindness can be created in many ways. Some people talked about how the act of kindness carried through the rest of their day

and inspired them to spread kindness themselves. Many folks appreciated the prompt to think about kind things that other people have done for them, and have kept the “experiment” in mind over the past few weeks. One participant stated “I know how I felt when I received your act of kindness and I’d like to be a part of creating that impact for others”.

In conclusion, there is no doubt that kindness benefits individuals, and there is mounting evidence that kindness curricula can have lasting effects in schools. We recommend that AOK Maine continue to focus on spreading kindness in local schools and we hope that these initiatives will help cement kindness as a core value in our youth. This seems like the best way to utilize random acts of kindness to effect the large-scale change in society that AOK Maine (and the project team) desires. And in the meantime, there is no harm in everyone trying to be a little bit kinder every day.

APPENDIX

A five-person Leadership Maine team assisted Acts of Kindness Maine as their practicum project. In addition to research, the team conducted an experiment with the full 35-person Leadership Maine cohort, in which they presented a personalized hand-written thank-you note to each of their fellow classmates expressing how that person had positively affected the collective experience of Leadership Maine (homemade cookies were also provided with the notes). The classmates were then asked to keep acts of kindness in mind over the following month and provide any feedback (via a survey) about the impact of the act of kindness on them or any other acts they observed or in which they participated. Survey results are presented below, followed by the list of Leadership Maine participants.

1. The AOK team gave out cookies and notes of kindness – how did that experience resonate with you?

- It was a great experience and reminder that we can create kindness in many ways. Particularly nice to have Andi chose a card she knew would be a connection for me.
- It built a sense of connection and community to all of you as individuals and also the class.
- It made me smile and appreciate that, small thoughtful acts like this can really make a difference in someone's day.
- I have thought about that act several times. To me, it's very meaningful to know that someone took the time to think about me as a person and express something positive they have gained from knowing me.
- The unexpected kind act really brightened my day. The personalized note is what really stood out the most even though the cookies were amazing. The personal connection and thought that went into it was very impactful.
- While I can eat cookies all day long, it was the personal note that was so nice. It had a personal piece of information, which means someone is listening to you.- And that is a fundamental of kindness, I'd say.
- I appreciated that the team recognized me!
- I loved it and was touched by the kind gesture, the amount of time that went into making the cookies and the custom note.

2. Did the above experience change anything for you?

- It felt good. Knowing that you thought about me and others enough to offer an AOK with it a personalized card. Keeps front of mind for me that there are good people in the world doing things at the micro and macro levels.
- To remember to try to fit small acts of kindness into my day.
- I try to make sure that my colleagues know that I care about them as people. This reinforced for me that taking the time to write it down and share it is worth it.
- It made me appreciate even more the relationships built through Leadership Maine and reflect upon all of the good that exists in the world.
- It didn't change anything for me, but it did reinforce for me how simple things can go a long way - especially nice and unexpected actions.
- Good reminder that a simple recognition of someone's good qualities can help them offset the inevitable list of challenging things that they deal with daily

- Yes.
- A thank you card would have been in order, and I did not get that done. But, it has made me more aware of how I can (and do) kind things for our staff at school.

3. Did the experience inspire you to perform an act of kindness?

- Yes. For staff and it's also a reminder to prioritize taking the time to create positive experiences for people. Rushing usually does not equal kindness.
- It allowed me to stop a minute and think about gratitude, about this AOK and other things in my life for which I am grateful. That small moment of reflection helped me reset my framing for the day, carried over into the rest of the day, and I made sure to connect with my kids and partner when I got home. I actually have thought about this AOK daily since then, and have been working into my day small AOKs giving to others. I know how I felt as a recipient and I'd like to be a part of creating that impact for others.
- Yes
- I struggle with random acts of kindness sometimes because I feel weird about being caught doing it. Is that lame or what?
- Absolutely. When you are a recipient of acts of kindness it makes you want to go out and do something nice for someone else to pay it forward.
- I truly thought about it for a long time! I didn't do anything specifically motivated by the cookies and notes, but in a few situations that might ordinarily be more frustrating for me (airline travel) I slowed down and gave others the benefit of the doubt and a smile.
- Not specifically, no
- Yes

4. What is the kindest thing anyone has ever done for you?

- As a young woman, I received an anonymous scholarship to a music camp that I never could have afforded on my own, and it was one of the best experiences of my youth. It turns out that one of my former teachers was the benefactor. As an adult, I think about the outpouring of food and support my community offered my family after my mother passed unexpectedly.
- In high school a mentor of mine at the job I was currently working in after school and on the weekends took time after work to talk to me about my career and offer guidance about bettering myself by not engaging with certain groups of people and thinking more long term about where I hope to go in my life. This real candid feedback that had nothing to do with my job performance but really impacted the trajectory of my life and left me feeling so appreciative that this person I respected so much cared enough to have this difficult conversation with me. This also highlighted the importance to me as a leader of connecting personally with your team members and how someone's personal life has a direct impact on their success professionally as well.
- Nearly 20 years ago I had my driver's license suspended for a short period of time for reasons that aren't important to the story. Miraculously, through Craig's List, I found a regular ride to and from work (round trip Portland to Brunswick) each day from an almost-stranger. I knew of him from community work but not personally and while I insisted on paying gas \$\$ he was flexible with commuting times so I could be at work and at home when needed. He was just a

kind human and inspired me on so many levels day to day. I mean who scans Craig's List to find people they can give rides to?

- I specifically remember one time when I was going through a really challenging time, a colleague at work stopped at DD and bought me a donut and left it on my desk for me to discover when I arrived at the office.
- There are many in my life – the most recent one is our 3-year old grandson saying he loves and misses us!
- Gosh, I don't know; I have received lots of kindness over the years.

5. Can you give a recent example of an act of kindness you have done, or experienced (no matter how big or small)?

- I had taken my kiddos on a bike ride to get a donut treat at the Holy Donut near our home. Upon approval at the donut shop, I realized I had left my wallet at home! I explained to my kids what had happened and they were very disappointed. The strangers behind me heard (who were out of state) and offered to treat my kids to a donut. We were all so grateful and happy!
- A colleague won a prize at a company event that she knew I wanted – a ladder toss game, of all things – and she quietly had it sent to me. I recently gave a co-worker a jacket that I had won that I thought she would like.
- During one of the last major wind storms that we had in Maine there was a large tree that had fallen across a neighbor's driveway and they were stuck in their house without power. That night I helped cut up the tree and remove it so they could get out of the house. They were so appreciative because they did not have the money to get it removed or have a chainsaw to do it themselves.
- 3 years ago our family provided housing to an asylum-seeking family of 5 from the Congo for 3 months. It was very impulsive on our part, but a tremendous experience for our family in many ways and reinforced the importance of kindness on a daily level.
- But what I really want to say is that I think kindness is a sort of implicit bias. Just as our parents and those who influence us while growing up may predispose us to think certain ways - if those same people demonstrate kindness themselves- thoughts and deeds -and expect it of you, it becomes a way of living - in many small ways each day. So some of us are predisposed, and some, perhaps, not so much.
- My sister is a giver and supports me endlessly with all sorts of things. When my work takes me away from my teenage kids she'll inevitably find ways to visit them and provide an adult presence.
- I gave a bouquet of flowers to our elderly neighbor.
- A rental car person was kind to me this weekend, reversing some charges and believing what I told him. Kindness I have done: lots of sharing of resources at a large family event.

APPENDIX**Leadership Maine 2022-2023 Class*****Indicates member of AOK Maine practicum team**

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| Susan | Ahern | MaineHealth | Vice President of Innovation |
| *Lisa | Archer | New Ventures Maine | Asset Program Manager |
| Brian | Ballute | Saco & Biddeford Savings Institution | SVP / CFO & Treasurer |
| William | Benson | Boots2Roots | Executive Director |
| Samantha | Burdick | Hight Family of Dealerships | Marketing Director |
| Shannon | Coffin | Good Shepherd Food Bank | VP of Community Partnerships |
| Kelly | Dorsey | Androscoggin Bank | VP, Senior Treasury Officer |
| Allyson | Goida | The Roux Institute at Northeastern University | Founder Residency Program Manager |
| Sarah | Guerette | CEI | Director, CEI Women's Business Center |
| Catharine | Hartnett | Electric Power Research Institute | Strategic Content Manager |
| Kyle | Holmstrom | Cianbro Corporation | CFO & Treasurer |
| Laura | Lee | Maine Community Foundation | Program Officer |
| Michael | Levinsky | MEMIC | Director, Tax & Compliance |
| Judy | Long | Versant power | Manager, Communications & Brand |
| Matthew | Marston | Northern Light Health | VP, Chief Pharmacy Officer |
| Brandon | McDonald | Northern Maine Development Commission | Director, Small Business Development Center |
| Phoenix | McLaughlin | State of Maine DECD | Tax Incentive Policy Manager |
| Jana | McQuilkin | Finance Authority of Maine | Marketing Communications Officer |
| *Michael | O'Connor | Bangor Savings Bank | Controller |
| Nate | Parenteau | University of Maine System | Assistant Director of Admissions |
| *Gina | Quinn-Skillings | MaineHealth | Senior Medical Director |

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|-----------|---------------|--|--|
| Laura | Rideout | Preti Flaherty Beliveau & Pachios, LLP | Attorney/Partner |
| Tarsha | Rodrigue | MaineGeneral Health | Administrative Director, Skilled & Long-Term Care |
| Megan | Sanders | Penobscot Community Health Care | Chief Legal Officer & Chief Human Resources Office |
| Nina | Scheepers | Maine Venture Fund | Principal |
| Megan | Shapiro Ross | Footprints Food Pantry | Executive Director |
| Keith | Smith | L.L. Bean | Senior Manager of Engineering |
| *Andrea | Summers | Foundation for Portland Public Schools | Executive Director |
| Ander | Thebaud | RSU 24 Adult Education | Director |
| *Ethan | Tremblay | State of Maine Governor's Energy Office | Energy Policy Analyst |
| June | Usher-Wallace | Androscoggin Bank | VP, Southern Maine Market Manager |
| Shraddha | Vadvalkar | The Jackson Laboratory | Associate Director, COO's Office |
| Michael | Walton | First Federal Savings & Loan Association of Bath | VP, Strategic Initiatives |
| Elizabeth | Warren | Martin's Point Health Care | Director, Practice Operations |
| Leo | Waterston | FocusMaine | Program Director |