

## ACTS OF KINDNESS MAINE – FIRST YEAR REPORT May 2023 – May 2024

This has been an astonishing first year of full-scale activities for [Acts of Kindness Maine \(AOK Maine\)](#). We went from not much more than an idea in early 2023 to becoming a vibrant nonprofit touching the lives of many people throughout Maine and beyond. The hunger for connection and belonging in America combined with the power of kindness to bridge divides have been powerful catalysts for our work. At a time when Americans seem divided in so many ways, kindness is a rare exception. Whether straight or gay; Black, white or brown; conservative or liberal, few people argue that we don't need more kindness in our lives.

AOK Maine's vision and our theory of change are unique in the national landscape. We go far beyond just putting "be kind" signs in yards. We are pursuing the creation of a statewide "civic architecture" that embeds an ethos of kindness within Maine's existing civic structures and creates new civic structures, where needed.

We're not just talking about "random" acts of kindness. We are helping individuals and institutions embrace kindness as an intentional practice, as a discipline, as a social and organizational framework. We are exploring kindness as the foundation for local and state policy policymaking and are seeking to bring kindness in the socially-destructive realm of politics that is tearing apart the fabric of society.

We view kindness as an overarching ethos that encompasses the full range of human values, from courage, honesty, and forgiveness, to beauty, presence, and grace, and much more, as portrayed in this inspiring article [The Underrated Value of Kindness](#). We present the diverse dimensions of kindness as a [Wheel of Kindness](#) that underpins many of our activities.

Maine, we believe, can set an example for the rest of the nation of what can be achieved when an entire state devotes itself to an ethos of kindness, compassion, and caring for each other. Is this idealistic? Of course it is. Ideals are needed now more than ever. In an era of radical extremism and outright social and political cruelty, we should be aiming for nothing less than radical kindness as a force for social change. But we also ground our idealism in a pragmatic down-to-earth systems-based approach. We view our work as "operationalizing kindness."

Maine is the perfect proving ground for our vision. As a state of mostly small communities, Maine provides a fertile seedbed for weaving together multiple community-wide efforts into an integrated statewide foundation of kindness.

The small-town nature of Maine has enabled AOK Maine to form partnerships that have greatly amplified our efforts. Over the past year, we have achieved success in the following areas:

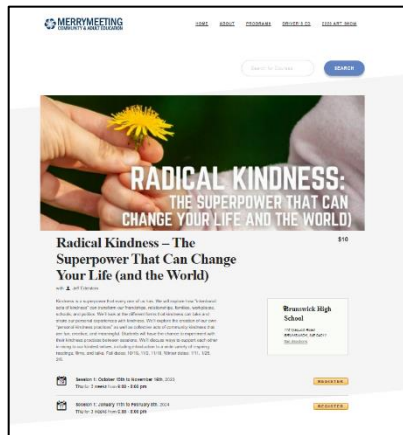
- Adult education courses
- Senior Citizen workshops
- Rotary Club talks
- College & University guest-teaching
- Monthly Kindness Meetups
- Faith Community workshops and activities

- Substance Use Rehabilitation workshops
- Civic Leadership programs
- Community Kindness Committee development
- Regional and national conference keynote speeches and presentations

Going forward, we will be expanding statewide within entire systems. For example, in 2023, every one of the twenty adult education programs in southern and mid-coast Maine that we contacted about our Radical Kindness courses was enthusiastic about hosting a course. From these, we chose eight programs to work with in order to experiment with different formats. Based on this first year's experience, it is clear that with added staff and/or community volunteers, we can be offering kindness courses in every one of the 69 adult and community education program in Maine, and starting this fall, we will be experimenting with additional courses, such as Moral Courage. We are confident that this type of statewide engagement is feasible in all areas of our work, such as with higher education, public libraries, senior citizen agencies, Rotary Clubs, and more. We fully expect to directly connect with tens of thousands of Mainers through our activities in the coming years.

## A YEAR OF LEARNING, PILOTING, PARTNERING

**Adult education courses:** We connected with over one hundred students in single-session and three-session formats through courses in Portland, Brunswick, Biddeford, Windham, York, Standish, Cornish, and Waterboro run in partnership with local adult and community education programs. The courses were quite well-received and in some cases the participants enthusiastically continued meeting even after the course was completed.



Our courses go beyond simply “teaching kindness.” We have provided participants the chance to connect with each other about the struggles and joys of life. The caring and support that students have provided each other has been breathtaking as they have shared about births, deaths, divorces, reconciliations, betrayals, and other meaningful and challenging life events.

We developed a three-part format for our classes: 1) sharing, checking in and support; 2) discussing articles and videos on various aspects of kindness; and 3) skill-building on specific kindness methods. We developed unique tools such as a kindness self-assessment and a “wheel of kindness” to guide daily, weekly or monthly kindness practices.

Our skill-building activities focus on emotional validation vs. invalidation, empowerment vs. drama, non-violent communication, compassionate boundary-setting, and other kindness-related skills.

We look forward to expanding our offerings to all 69 adult and community education programs in Maine.



**Senior Citizen workshops:** In partnership with Southern Maine Agency on Aging and Avesta Housing, we held workshops for senior citizens in Kittery, Yarmouth, South Portland, and Sanford, reaching around 120 people in total, with highly positive outcomes. First, we found that simply describing the various ways that AOK Maine is working to bring more kindness to Maine lifted the spirits of many attendees who, at this late stage of their lives, feel discouraged by the increasing divisiveness and outright cruelty they see around them. It gave them a sense of hopefulness to learn how AOK Maine is working to make the world a kinder place. Second, attendees had a chance to share stories about



kindnesses they have experienced in their lives. For those who spoke, it provided them a chance to share parts of themselves that even longtime friends in the group might not have been aware of and a chance to reflect on people and experiences to be grateful for. For everyone, the stories were reminders of the goodness in the world and a chance to learn new things about each other. On more than one occasion, someone identified someone else in the room as the kindest person they'd ever known. We also heard stories about life-changing "tough love" acts of kindness, apologies and forgiveness given years after conflict, and about acts of generosity and caring. Third, attendees were eager to use the blank thank-you cards we provided to send to people who they are grateful for, creating a ripple effect touching other people's lives beyond just those attending the workshops. Examples of participants sharing their stories of kindness can be heard [here](#).



**Rotary Clubs:** We gave two well-received presentations at Rotary Clubs in Southern Maine. One of the presentations can be viewed [here](#). Rotary International is a natural partner for AOK Maine, given its status as the leading international network of service-oriented community civic clubs. We have begun discussions with [Rotary District #7780](#) about possibilities for collaboration with all of their 35 Rotary clubs in Maine.

**Specialty Keynotes and Workshops:** We designed and implemented activities for diverse audiences, including the Keynote Presentation for the annual meeting of a chapter of the Maine Credit Union League; a Kindness for the Holidays workshop for the Chaplaincy Institute of Maine, and a kindness workshop for a group home for women in substance-use recovery.

**College & University classes:** We were invited to guest-teach classes in education, communications, and business ethics at Saint Joseph's College and University of New England, each of which we approached through a lens of kindness. Our teaching was very well-received, with feedback including statements like "Jeff, you were amazing today!!! The students loved you, and so did I" and "Jeff Edelstein was easily my favorite guest speaker of the semester."

**Community Kindness Committees:** We began developing the concept of "Community Kindness Committees" to address isolation, separation and division in Maine's communities. These committees will create mutual aid rosters; support former inmates, shut-ins, individuals struggling with mental health issues, and others facing special challenges; run kindness-focused book groups, social events, student activities; and more. Kindness can be a powerful organizing principle to bring people together across the cultural and political divides increasingly prevalent in our communities today. These committees will serve as a focal point for our activities with partners such as adult education programs, social service agencies, Rotary Clubs, colleges and universities, libraries, K-12 education, faith institutions, non-profits, local government, and community residents. Read more [here](#).

**Human Resources in Higher Education Conference:** AOK Maine's Jeff Edelstein gave the Keynote Address at the [College & University Professional Association for Human Resources](#)' New England Conference in November 2023 to over 80 HR directors and staff from a diverse mix of institutions, ranging from elite private universities to community colleges. Given how fraught the field of HR in higher education is in these polarized times, the concept of kindness as an

organizing principle in HR was very well-received. Read the address [here](#) along with other materials relating to kindness in the workplace and in higher education.

### **Maine Development Foundation (MDF):** AOK Maine partnered with MDF's [Leadership](#)

[Maine](#) program which provided AOK Maine with a 5-person practicum team for an eight-month period. In addition to valuable research on kindness initiatives around the U.S., the practicum team conducted an



experiential kindness project with the full 35-person Leadership Maine cohort, measuring the impact of personalized acts of kindness. Practicum team members included senior leaders with the Foundation for Portland Public Schools, Bangor Savings Bank, New Ventures Maine, MaineHealth, and Maine DEP. The final report and slide show are [here](#).

AOK Maine was invited to attend a peer consultation session with Maine Development Foundation's 24-person [Institute for Civic Leadership](#) (ICL) 2023 cohort. The process provided us with valuable insights about how to move forward as a startup nonprofit and helped us build relationships with a number of ICL participants interested in supporting our mission.

### **National Conference on Dialogue & Deliberation:**

AOK Maine's Jeff Edelstein served as the "Chief Kindness Officer" for this [conference](#) in Atlanta of over 300 mediators, facilitators and academics from throughout the U.S. and Canada. We created a [Kindness Scavenger Hunt](#) and provided blank thank-you cards to all attendees to write personal notes of gratitude to session presenters, venue staff, or whomever they wished. We also conducted three well-attended sessions:

- "How Kindness-Informed Dialogue Can Reshape Society"
- "Kindness - Superpower for the 21st Century & Beyond"
- "The Power Of Kindness - A Courageous Pathway In An Age Of Uncertainty"



The conference provided us with new ideas for our work and helped us expand our network of partners throughout the U.S. and Canada. The interest expressed by individuals and organizations from around the U.S. in implementing similar statewide programs has inspired us to develop our programs in ways they can easily be adopted in other states.

### **Frontiers of Democracy Conference:** AOK Maine played an active role at [Frontiers of](#)

[Democracy](#), an annual conference at Tufts University's Tisch College of Civic Life that convenes practitioners and scholars from across the United States and overseas. The 2023 theme of "Religious Pluralism and Robust Democracy in Multiracial Societies" aligned perfectly with AOK Maine's use of kindness to bridge the gap between diverse faith communities and provide ways for people who have left organized religion to engage around values of kindness as a tool for creating healing in America's increasingly fractured communities.



AOK Maine's Jeff Edelstein conducted a well-attended breakout session titled [\*Democracy: What's Kindness Got to Do With It?\*](#) that explored the intersections between kindness, religious pluralism and democratic functions. Jeff also organized and facilitated a dinner discussion with a diverse set of conference presenters at the forefront of America's religious pluralism and interfaith activities. The conference served a valuable role in introducing the concept of kindness as an organizing principle to the field of democracy reform as well as to a number of national leaders in the religious pluralism and interfaith communities.