

On Your Corner: The kindness domino effect at Allendale Christian

by: Casey Jones

ALLENDALE TOWNSHIP, Mich. (WOOD) — The message to this year's fifth graders at Allendale Christian School is simple: Be kind.

"We've talked a lot about how kindness is like the domino effect. You spread kindness to one person and then they spread it to another and another, another, and it keeps going forever," teacher Jessica Kirchhoff said.

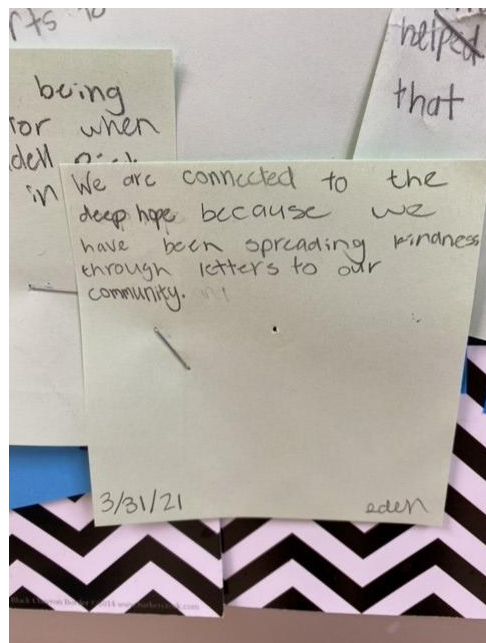
Kirchhoff and John Vandenberg have 29 students. Since September of 2020, they've been putting kindness to paper. Something they started after reading the book "Wonder" by R. J. Palacio.

"The whole theme of that book is to choose kind, so that's kind of what sparked this whole thing," Kirchhoff said. "We started out with thanking people at our school and just local people and our principal and specialist teachers. And then John is the one who kind of had the idea to get it even bigger than that."

Vandenberg remembers writing a letter to then-President George W. Bush when he was in elementary school. He remembers the letter his class got back from Bush and the feeling that came along with the words.

"Getting a reply back from him was just like, wow, we got a reply back from the president," Vandenberg recalls of that fourth-grade moment. "We were just getting started in government teaching and teaching the levels and branches of government that we thought, 'Hey, how about we just encourage and send kindness?'"

That's exactly what they did. They started with a simple letter explaining who they were and how the book "Wonder" led them to the "Choose Kind -> Spread Kind Initiative." They included individual notes of encouragement and asked that the recipient return the letter and tell the class how they chose to spread kindness because of the fifth grader's message. After a positive response from staff, the letters were signed, stamped, and delivered to more than 150 government leaders, churches and fifth graders across the country.



"We're teaching these kids that they can still send kindness, even if it's not sent back," Vandenberg said.

The kids really wanted to hear back.

"We wanted them to see that it's also contagious to send to people and get replies back. It just fills them with more joy and excitement of what's to come," he said.

Nearly eight months later, the two classes are bursting with joy and excitement. Letters started to come back — a few at a time, and then more and more. Before they could send more out, they kept pouring in and pretty soon the board in the back of the classroom was filled with people across the country who had received their kindness and passed it along to others.

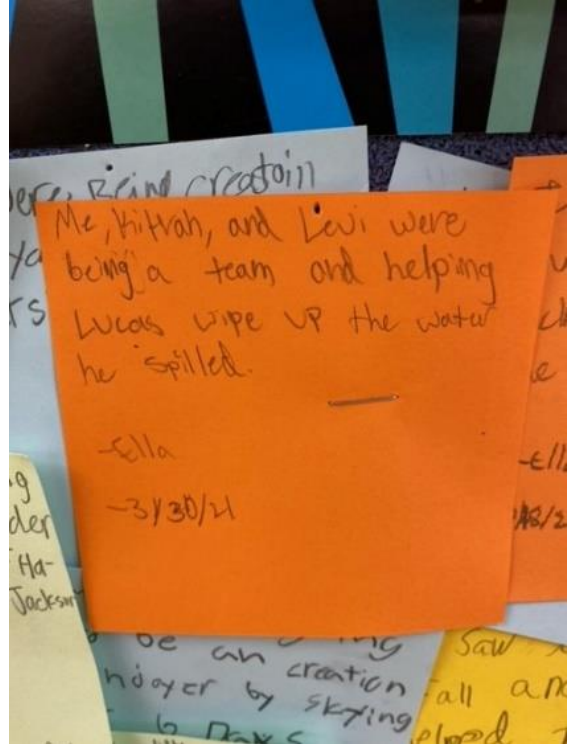
“I think they’re starting to realize this is bigger than they would’ve thought,” VandenBerg said. “A lot of the responses we’ve gotten from people is, they’re saying words matter and our actions matter. And I think they need to hear that from people in leadership positions.”

Local state Rep. Luke Meerman, R-Coopersville, responded with individual handwritten notes to each student. Then he came and read to the class and thanked them for their message of support.

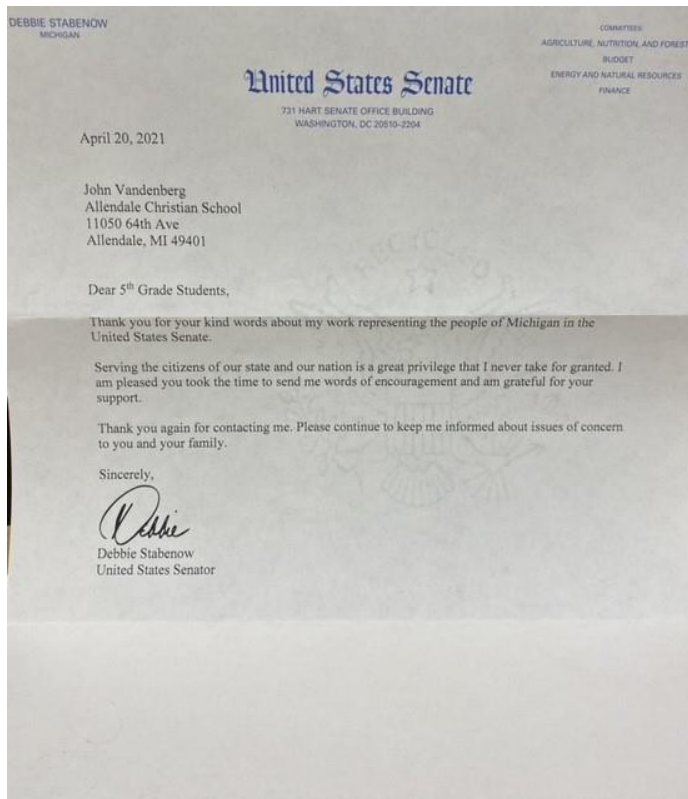
Others responded that they bought a coffee for someone behind them or wrote a letter to someone else.

“I did not expect this at all,” Kirchoff smiled. “I didn’t really expect that many replies, like the ones that we have gotten so far, it’s just been amazing and yeah, just the fact that it keeps growing more and more too. And it’s kind of like we’re in this together.”

It’s a wall of business CEOs and state politicians that hang alongside replies from Sen. Debbie Stabenow, D-Mich., state Rep. Mark Huizenga, R-Walker, and the Tim Tebow Foundation. They’re still waiting for their response from Presidents Joe Biden and Donald Trump. In the meantime, they keep writing, and more importantly for Kirchoff and VandenBerg, they keep turning the words into actions.



U.S. Sen. Debbie Stabenow, D-Lansing, responds to fifth-grade students at Allendale Christian Middle School who sent her notes of encouragement and kindness.



“Kindness doesn’t just show up in a card. Kindness shows in actions, in our words. And we use that a lot with some of our issues if we do have any, is ‘Hey, was that using kind words?’ ‘Was that using kind actions?’ If these are people who we call teammates, as a classmate, how do you do that outside of school as well,” VandenBerg said. “It’s, I think, sinking in a little more than I thought it would. I mean, as a teacher, you’re always trying to get kids to be kind. But how you do that? With something like this, I feel like it has made a bigger difference.”

Differences both teachers have heard about outside of school. Kirchoff had a parent call her to say she thought some of the boys were prank calling businesses during a sleepover one weekend. It turns out they were calling local restaurants to tell them they were doing a good job and they were

appreciated. "It's been powerful to see them want to continue it," VandenBerg said. "They want to send it to someone that they know personally, either hand deliver or in the mail."

The domino effect: A mission in making kindness a chain reaction and in making fifth-grade homework a lifelong lesson plan.

"I talk with my class a lot about, in years to come if you don't remember me, I hope you at least remember to choose kind because that was our whole purpose of fifth grade," Kirchhoff said. "And I just hope it's something that will stick with them forever."

Be a part of the "Choose Kind -> Be Kind Initiative" and write a letter of kindness or support to the fifth graders at Allendale Christian, 11050 64th Ave., Allendale, MI 49401.

