

A simple act of kindness: Allendale fifth graders spreading kindness, encouragement

ANDREA GOODELL | TUESDAY, JANUARY 26, 2021



Jessica Kirchhoff (left) and John Vanden Berg, fifth grade teachers at Allendale Christian School, have led their students in a kindness initiative this year.

An act of kindness — as one group of fifth graders is learning — doesn't just stop at one person.

“Spreading kindness to one person and that spreads to another person and to another person and to another and so on,” says Karissa Moelker, 10, a fifth grade student at Allendale Christian School.

They started by writing letters of encouragement to people at their own school — the school board, principal, specials teachers, and others. Before the end of the year, the students had written to 50 different leaders in the greater community. About a third of them sent replies.

The idea came at the very beginning of the new school year with the classes reading the book [Wonder](#). The theme that runs throughout *Wonder* and that has catapulted it to the top of many teachers' reading lists is “choose kind.”

Spreading kindness

The fifth graders at Allendale Christian School took it a step further to create the Choose Kind --> Spread Kind Initiative.

“It developed into this pretty big initiative,” fifth grade teacher Jessica Kirchhoff says.

Fifth grade teacher John Vanden Berg thought back to what made his own fifth grade year memorable and remembered writing to the president of the United States, hoping to receive a reply.

Soon, his students were writing to leaders from every level of government, encouraging them to spread kindness wherever they could.

No politics allowed

They wrote to President Donald Trump and Vice President Mike Pence. Then, after the election, they wrote to President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris.

“We’re writing to all because we know God calls us to respect all in authority. Politics has no place. We’re just spreading kindness,” Vanden Berg says.

“Especially when you’re in fifth grade,” chimes in Nathan Breuker, 10, with a little laugh.

What's a CEO?

One day in class, it came up that Vanden Berg happened to know a CEO. The kids, he says, were a little astonished at that fact and decided they had to include her in their campaign.

Mina Breuker, CEO of Holland Home, which provides assisted and independent living for seniors in West Michigan, received a rather large surprise in the mail shortly before Christmas.

“It is filled with homemade cards,” Breuker says. “Some have my name on front, some have ‘thank you,’ some have ‘merry Christmas.’ They all have letters inside.”

Some of them wrote songs or poems. One said: “Thank you for taking care of the old people!”

“One — it was so sweet — I just really came to tears. I read them to my husband. It was really quite amazing,” she says.

Pass it on

The letter gave her an assignment: “We want to spread kindness. What do you do to spread kindness?”

“We’re sitting here with tears running down our cheeks,” she says.

She sent the box of cards and letters to the employees of Holland Home, saying “Look, guys. This thank you is for all of you.”

Responding to the kids was the best feeling of all, she says.

“Thank you for spreading kindness,” Breuker wrote in her email to the fifth grade classes. “Your words matter and touched me. Maybe once COVID has passed you could visit Holland Home, or I could visit with you at school!”

In writing

Karissa says many of the letters start out the same way: “This year we’re trying to spread kindness. We appreciate everything you have done.”

“We’re mostly saying we hope God will stay with you. We want you to keep pushing on,” Nathan says.

The kids write each recipient’s name in cursive on the envelope, just one more little act of kindness,

because everyone likes to see their name written out in nice script.

“We can’t necessarily step outside of school, go on field trips and things,” Vanden Berg says. “This kind of brings that outside of school experience into the classroom.”

Community leaders

The students wrote thank you notes to the cleaning crews who worked to clean up the Capitol after the Jan. 6 riots.

They wrote to judges, fire fighters, the elderly, veterans, and other community leaders.

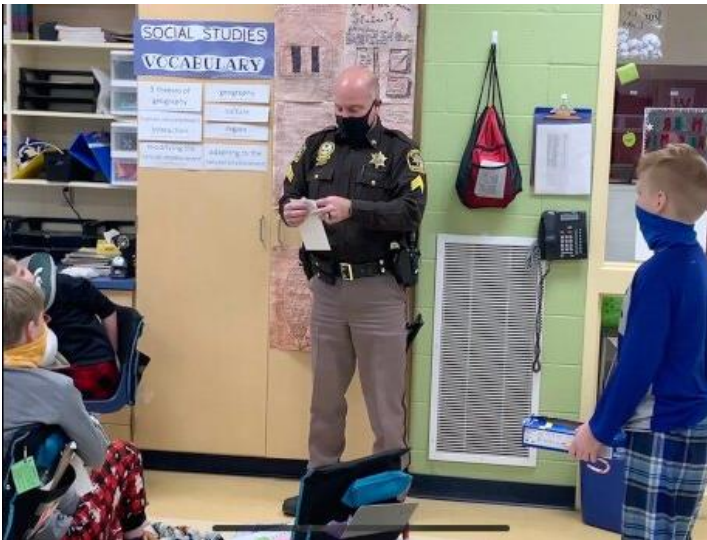
They have, of course, also written to *Wonder* author R.J. Palacio to let her know how much her book has meant to them.

The kids took the initiative, Kirchoff says. They choose the organizations to include. They looked up the addresses. It became a lesson in reading, social studies, technology, letter writing, and business skills for a start. However, kindness is still at the core.

“We talk about kindness every single day. It’s kind of cool. It’s become a big part of fifth grade,” Kirchoff says.

Now, they have 100 more addresses on their list and they plan to keep sending letters. Among them are students at other Christian schools.

“It’s kind of a call to action for other fifth graders,” Vanden Berg says. “We’re spreading kindness. Now it’s your turn.”



Ottawa County Sheriff's Sgt. Cal Keuning visited the fifth grade students of Allendale Christian School after they sent letters of encouragement.

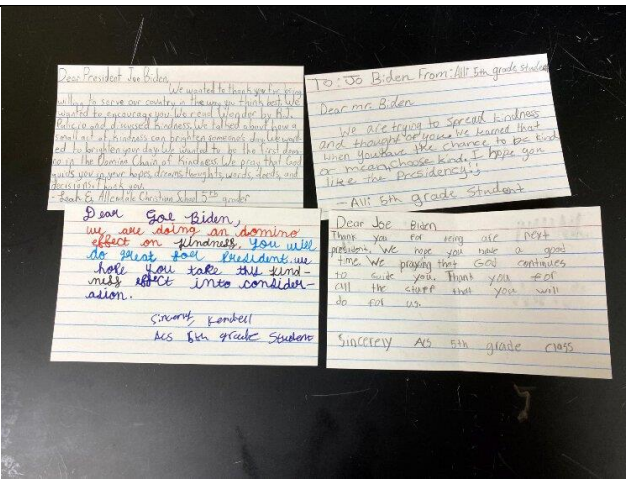




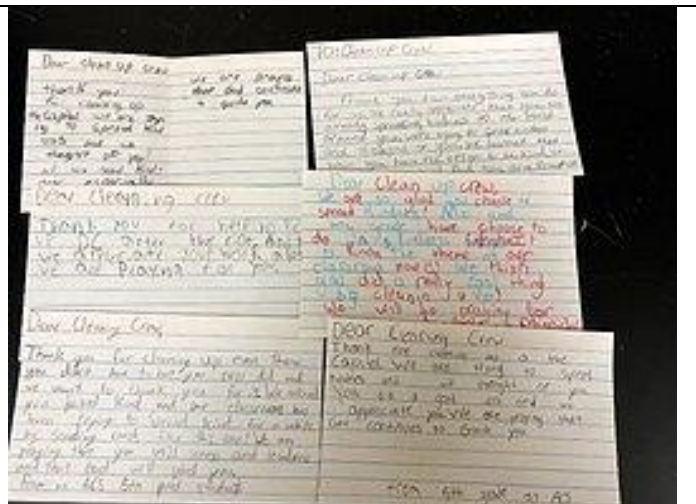
Karissa Moelker, 10, a fifth grade student at Allendale Christian School writes a letter of kindness to a community leader.



Zaida Viveros, a fifth grade student at Allendale Christian School, writes a letter of kindness and encouragement to a community leader.



Fifth grade students at Allendale Christian School wrote to community leaders from every level of government, encouraging them. These letters are to President Joe Biden.



Fifth grade students at Allendale Christian School wrote to community leaders from every level of government, encouraging them. These letters are to the clean up crews that restored the U.S. Capitol after riots Jan. 6.



Karissa Moelker, 10, a fifth grade student at Allendale Christian



Nathan Breuker, 10, is a fifth grade student at Allendale Christian.