

“You Deserve a Smile” Take Action Project

By: Karen Rutledge

1. Identify Your Concern

With so many technological advances, the world may appear more connected than ever. However, the little things in life often seem to be missing. There is little to no interaction with strangers, and heads are stuck in cell phones and computers while in public areas. When we experience unexpected acts of kindness, whether it is receiving a compliment or a simple smile, it can make a huge impact. These small things that are so simple to be a part of do not happen as much as they could or should. My concern is that people are not communicating while living in their own world. This may leave people feeling alone or sad. If we could make a person's entire day better by doing one tiny thing for them, why would we not take the time to do that? To me, it does not make sense that these acts of kindness are not a part of many people's everyday life. They come at no cost to the person performing the good deed, and are only beneficial to someone else by allowing them to have a smile. It could lead to a friendship. It could lead to someone else passing it on. It could lead to that person putting a positive spin on their day rather than feeling down. You never know what your actions may do to impact another person's life.

My idea for this concern started when I was living in London, Ontario during the summer of 2008. Coming from a relatively small town in Nova Scotia, I am used to

saying hi to those you pass on the sidewalk while walking, or smiling and asking “How are you?” at the grocery store. Even though the distance is not huge between Nova Scotia and Ontario, the attitude is completely different. While going out with my co-workers from London downtown to get ice cream, I smiled and said “hi” to the first person we passed. The man glanced away and kept walking without returning the greeting.

Immediately, the girls I was with said, “Do you know him?” and “Why would you say hi to a stranger? You don’t do that here...” It made me think how odd this seemed, and that saying hello to someone should not be seen as so risky. After that, I’d always thought of how ridiculous it was that anyone would feel discomfort in saying hi or doing these small acts of kindness just because you do not know someone. I feel that people need to be more connected and work together in order for the world to be a better place. This issue is of importance because people need to work together in the real world. The more that people can cooperate and get along, the fewer problems we may have in the long run.

2. Research Your Concern

My first thought about this project was that it was similar to “Pay it Forward,” which is a project that has been recognized by declared “Pay it Forward” days and a Hollywood movie, released in 2000. As I researched ideas for paying it forward, and what had been done already in this area, I realized it wasn’t exactly what I was looking to do. Many of the ideas for this concept were done without having contact with another person and done in secrecy. I absolutely believe that this is a great way to help others and to make someone’s day, but my original goal was to have people more connected and talk

to one another more frequently. Paying it forward generally has ideas such as paying for the person's coffee behind you, or collecting items for a certain group or charity. I also found through my research that much of what has been done by paying it forward involves money. My hope was not to have people spend money, simply because not everyone has money to spend and that should not be what kindness is about. I believe there are an infinite number of possibilities to make someone smile without any money being necessary.

I then found a program and website that seemed more suitable;
www.randomactsofkindness.org. The ideas and stories offered on this website seemed to have a more personal touch, showing the impact of a small decision. There are amazing stories on this website of individuals who wanted to change the world in their own small way, and the impacts of they have on other lives is unbelievable. "Peach's Neet Feet" is a program that a girl and her brother created in order to help children going through cancer and other illnesses. They custom paint sneakers for children and parents who need that extra boost in their day. The results of this project are inspiring. It really shows that you do not need something huge to change the world. Here is a link to the video clip of "Peach's Neet Feet," <http://www.randomactsofkindness.org/RAK-Week/>

3. Find Out Who Supports You

This project did not need as much support as many other projects may have in order to get started. All I needed was some pieces of paper, markers, and happy face stickers. Mostly, I needed people to help me spread some joy around from different areas.

I needed contacts in as many spots as possible in order to begin the chain of smiles.

Having relatives and contacts in each of the Atlantic Provinces and Ontario, I had a great starting point. I recruited co-workers, friends and family to help me begin the chain of smiles and good deeds in order to help brighten people's days.

At first I had contemplated looking for media attention for the project, talking to local newspapers and radio stations to see if I could talk about my idea. However, I decided that I thought this type of project would be better off being low-key, and that I wanted it to have as little to do with technology or being given out to mass quantities- computers, radios, television, etc. Anything like that, I felt, took away from the meaning to this project. The whole point is to have one-on-one contact with an individual, whether it is a stranger, acquaintance, or friend, and for that other person to feel special because they are who you picked to pass on a smile to. This project did not need support from big names or faces or companies. All it needed was people everywhere. In a sense, I put my project in the hands of strangers all around me.

4. Create a Plan

I continually thought of ideas that I could do to pass on a smile and spread joy to strangers, but I kept coming back to the simplest things. First, I came up with the title "You Deserve a Smile," because I truly believe that everyone does deserve to be smiling. You never know what another person may be going through. Everyone has their own daily struggles and long-term battles with who knows what. If I could change even one person's day, I thought this project would be worth it.

I then decided to make cards to pass out to multiple people. Originally, I thought it would be better to use something other than paper and markers to create the “smiles,” but again I wanted to be as simple as possible. I had considered using key chains, or something that may have a longer lasting life while being passed from person to person, but I decided paper was fine, and that if people planned on passing it on, they would do so whether it was paper or plastic or any other material for that matter. My budget proposal for this project was for spending the money on supplies to make long-lasting tokens to distribute, but after completing the form and thinking more about the intent of the project, I decided against using money and forgot about the budget aspect.

My plan was to then create the “You Deserve a Smile” cards, and simply pass them out to begin the chain. As you will read in the “Take Action” section, this is where it became difficult and interesting.

Lastly, I decided to set up an e-mail account for anyone who wanted to leave comments about the smiles they had received, and see if any of them had been passed on in wonderful ways.

5. Take Action

First, I had to make the cards. This was time consuming. My sister had recommended printing them, which would have only taken seconds. I felt that making them by hand with bright colored markers and stickers would seem much more personal, and perhaps they would grab even one extra person’s attention while considering passing

on a card. I will never really know if this made a difference or not, but I did not mind putting the time into the card making. The cards read:

“You Deserve a Smile!

Consider doing one of the following:

Compliment a stranger.

Hold the door for someone.

Say hello to someone you pass.

Help someone in need.

Now pass this smile to someone else! Tell us how you got this card at youdeserveasmile@gmail.com”

The final part of my plan was to pass these cards out. This was the trickiest part for many reasons. At first glance, it seems there is nothing difficult about this project, but passing out cards was at first quite intimidating. People just don't do these things, and go up to strangers offering a beautifully colored piece of paper with a ridiculous looking smiley face sticker on it. I felt silly. I quickly got over this though the more cards I passed out, and the more I realized that each card generally got a smile out of someone, even if it was an awkward situation. I had attempted to recruit a friend to help me deliver the cards to passersby, strangers, friends, or anyone at all. The immediate response was, “No... I'm not really comfortable doing that.” Perfect answer. They were only proving my point that people do not do these types of things. As much as I was disappointed that I did not have any help, I had to laugh at this because it is exactly what I had expected before starting this adventure.

The first “You Deserve a Smile” card I passed out was to a worker at a Dollarama store in Cobourg, Ontario. I mumbled something about, “Here is a smile. I’d like to pass it on to you and hope it makes your day!” The woman at the cash register gave a funny little smile and said “Oh... thank you,” before setting it down on the counter without reading it. She appeared to have no idea how to react to this situation. Once again, this was a perfect response. I simply smiled and left the store, likely leaving a confused cashier behind me. As I continued to pass out these cards, it became easier and easier and I got over any nervousness I had about approaching strangers. This was all there was to it. It just took time and bravery to approach new people.

6. Evaluate Your Plan

This project, as I knew it would be from the beginning, is hard to assess whether or not it really worked. It depends what someone may think success in this project is. I believe it was successful because at minimum I made the people smile to whom I passed out the “You Deserve a Smile” cards to. Even if they did not continue the cycle and threw them in the garbage after receiving them, it was that many more people that smiled because of a piece of paper and some markers. My hope, of course, is that these smiles will be continued to go from person to person, allowing as many people as possible to smile one more time in any given day. What would be even more amazing is if someone was inspired by this simple idea and did something else to help change the world. The magic of these smiles is that they may go on forever and I will not know.

As for the email account, I will still not truly have a sense of how long these cards were passed on, or if they are sitting on a street somewhere down the road from their original owner. On the contrary, I may leave this email account unopened for years and could then receive tons of emails about how great this idea was and how it made someone smile.

I did receive a few emails already about individuals who received “You Deserve a Smile” cards and had positive feedback. Here are some of the results:

“Hi,

What a great idea to intentionally spread a little joy to random people throughout your day! You "deserve a smile card" is a wonderful idea. It certainly proves the old adage "It's better to give than receive". Maybe a kind deed from a random person is the only gesture of kindness some people may experience on any given day. I Held the door for a lady who was following me out of a thrift store. Although I had time to go ahead and let the door close,it was worth a few seconds of my time to wait and show some kindness. The lady behind me said "thank-you, you know not many people do that anymore,they're always in such a rush going nowhere". I agreed. We chatted while walking to our cars and I passed the card on to her. I really believe that when we pay it forward great things will happen..Jesus says we are to love our neighbour.

Thank-you, your card is a wonderful idea!”

“I received this card in passing from a fellow student today! I think this is a great idea.. something as simple as a smile can brighten your day. We need more positive ideas circulating throughout our world today. Thank you!! And.. Dont forget to SMILE:)”

If I could do this project again, I would likely concentrate on something more specific, since the results of this were so vague. With extra time, I would be able to focus on a certain group of people I thought might need a smile, or do something special and individualized for people, such as “Peach’s Neet Feet” did. I am still considering ways I can do this in the future, both on my own and in a classroom setting. This would be an easy way to have students involved in their community. Students can learn from this project the impact they can have on their own world by doing something very small. The following are specific New Brunswick Social Studies/You and Your World Curriculum outcomes that could be met by doing a Take Action project similar to “You Deserve a Smile”:

Unit 4 Place and Community

Students will be expected to

K 4.4 identify connections between their community and other communities (local, national, and global). (11, You and Your World Curriculum)

Unit 1 Groups

Students will be expected to

- 1.1.1 demonstrate an understanding of the importance of interactions between people;
- 1.1.2 demonstrate an understanding of the similarity and diversity of social and cultural groups;
- 1.1.3 and demonstrate an understanding that people within groups have rights and responsibilities. (59, You and Your World Curriculum)

Technology and Community

Students will be expected to

- 2.2.1 describe how people contribute to making change in communities;

2.2.2 demonstrate an understanding that technology has changed over time to meet their needs, wants, and interests;
2.2.3 and predict ways their community might change in the future and how they might contribute to that future. (113, You and Your World Curriculum)

You and Your World Curriculum; Kindergarten-Grade 2. New Brunswick. March 2005. Web.

<http://www.gnb.ca/0000/publications/ss/YouandYourWorld.pdf>

7. Apply Your Learning

I have learned that people are predictable. I have learned that the majority of people do not enjoy interacting with strangers. When someone does say something nice, or give you a smile or a “hello,” they often receive weird looks in return. I am still wondering how this happened, and why people are so disconnected. People do not seem to like making phone calls, but would rather email or text back and forth. People do not often take few precious seconds out of their busy days to help someone else, or to make a difference. I cannot speak for all people, or say that this is the norm everywhere. Certain towns or areas are better at these types of personal connections than others. Some people are amazing at making these connections and are constantly striving to make someone else’s day. Some people do not care what others think of them, and have absolutely hearts of gold when it comes to helping others and spreading joy. While I have been reflecting on this process, I thought of a commercial that I have seen recently on kindness and how much it stands out. I have been unable to find a link or resource to find this commercial since I have seen it, but it features a man allowing a pregnant woman to take his seat on a

subway. They are yelling, and everyone is staring at them as the interaction takes place. The woman then says she will name her baby after the man because he was so kind. The point of the commercial is that if these things happened more often, they would not stand out so much, but rather be a part of everyday life. While reflecting on this project, I also thought of the bystander effect. This is the concept of people watching something happen while someone may be in need of help, but not doing anything because they assume that someone else will step in, and that it is not their place. Unfortunately, this happens far too often. Overall, I have learned that there is nothing better to do than continue random acts of kindness, passing on as many smiles as I can and encouraging friends, family, and students to do the same throughout their lives.

