



# 17 REASONS FOR OPTIMISM

It's been a bummer of a year, but there's still plenty of proof that kindness is an everyday occurrence. Draw inspiration from these stories of kids, neighbors, and friendly strangers.

BY RACHEL SYLVESTER

Photograph by Saroyan Humphrey



One person's busted laptop is another person's treasure. C.J. Willis restores computers for kids. Opposite page: Kindergarten teacher Sam Thomas makes garden bouquets for her neighbors.

Photograph by Nick Simonite

## BECAUSE THIS NEIGHBOR PAID IT FORWARD WITH FLOWERS

MOUNTAIN VIEW, CALIFORNIA

Kindergarten teacher and floral designer Sam Thomas lifted her neighbors' spirits by building bouquets from their gardens. Inspired by the beautiful blooms she saw on her frequent walks, Sam (pictured on page 118) floated the idea of a community flower swap on the social network Nextdoor: "I asked neighbors if they'd leave their cut flowers on their doorsteps so I could create arrangements," she says. Almost instantly, she received 20 responses—and got to work designing bouquets, or "rearrangements," as she calls them, and returning them to the participants. "The swap gave me the opportunity to get to know my neighbors while bringing them a bit of sunshine."



## BECAUSE THIS TEEN MAKES COMPUTERS MORE ACCESSIBLE

KILLEEN, TEXAS

Computer engineering student C.J. Willis, 19, is putting his tech talents to good use. Wanting to help increase access to computers—especially in the days of remote learning—C.J. (pictured on page 119) began restoring donated laptops and giving them to central Texans in need. So far he has refurbished 15 computers for students and families in his community. "I'll continue as long as old laptops and monitors make their way into my hands," he says.

## BECAUSE TOMORROW'S LAWYERS STEPPED UP

ANN ARBOR, MICHIGAN

Less than a month into the pandemic, law students at the University of Michigan were witnessing unemployment and evictions in their community. "Health impacts were top of mind, but we also knew the legal fallout would be huge," says Maiya Moncino, cofounder of MLaw COVID Corps. She and her team of 13 classmates (with an additional 250 on-call volunteers) started advocating for housing, voting, and workers' rights across the state. They are fighting to ensure that people who lose their jobs don't also lose their homes: "Until we know that Detroit families are safe in their homes, we'll provide support to as many tenants as possible," Maiya says.

## BECAUSE BALLOONS ARE FILLED WITH HOPE

BROOKLYN, NEW YORK

In the early days of the Covid-19 lockdown, balloon artist Christina Cartagena was crushed to see so many small businesses in her neighborhood shuttered. So she installed rainbow-colored balloon sculptures in front of seven temporarily closed shops.

The feedback for the eye-catching "balloon bombs" was both immediate and appreciative. "People reached out to thank me, and it brought me to tears," she says. "One person emailed me simply to say, 'Thank you for the light in a time of darkness.'"

## BECAUSE SOURDOUGH BRINGS ABOUT SOMETHING SWEET

SAN FRANCISCO

Baking is the new book club for a group of strangers turned internet comrades in the Bay Area. Jennifer Martin posted on Nextdoor asking neighbors if they'd be interested in a virtual baking club. The response was a resounding yes. Now numbering 591 members, the community of cooks post links to salted caramel cakes, share photos of homemade macarons, and help track down sourdough starter. "One young man even rode over on his bike to bring me two bags of bread flour," Jennifer says. She admits that sourdough production seems to have stalled over the summer: "I partially blame it on the quarantine 15," she jokes.



LEFT: COURTESY OF CHRISTINA CARTAGENA/BROOKLYN BALLOON GIRLS. RIGHT: COURTESY OF JENNIFER MARTIN



## Because I Pushed a Double Stroller in a Peaceful, Prayerful March

**W**HEN LAST spring's marches began, I was deep in quarantine with my husband, babies, and dog—making meals, cleaning the kitchen, baking bread. It was pretty Amish. I hadn't been home full-time with my twins since they were born in early 2019, and I felt like I was snorkeling: At first it was like, "This is so beautiful!" But also? Overwhelming!

As people started to march in memory of George, Breonna, Ahmaud, and too many others, I was sad and happy and frightened all at once. It's frustrating when you want to get out there but, oh yeah, there's that little virus that's killing everyone. When I found out there'd be a march on City Island, the Bronx neighborhood where I live, I knew we had to go. It was being led by a priest, and it would be peaceful and prayerful.

I marched while pushing the kids in their stroller—we're fighting for our families; we should be able to bring them. Luckily for me, it was nap time, so my little chicken nuggets were dreaming, hopefully for a better America. My husband is Dutch and didn't know what to expect at a protest. I couldn't quite explain it to him—how essential it is to scream for justice with perfect strangers in a public place. You feel less alone, knowing you all want change. It's bigger and more important than a hashtag. This time around, I saw more white people out there than ever, and I am so here for that. We need allies.

If you feel like you don't know how to march, let me help: Go with a friend. Go on the early side (things might get turned up later on). Make a sign to get your message across. And if marching isn't your thing, because of social anxiety or, um, Covid? Yeah, girl—that's OK. Donate your time and money and volunteer to do cleanup the morning after.

During our march, I took a lot of pictures so my family could remember it—that time we hunkered down together in the abyss of the unknown and got to know one another on a deeper level. That time my babies went to a protest while napping and woke up because their parents and neighbors were chanting, "No justice, no peace!" I hope these photos will inspire them to show up, stand up, and stomp for what's right in the world.

MICHELLE BUTEAU IS AN ACTOR AND COMEDIAN. HER MEMOIR, *SURVIVAL OF THE THICKEST*, WILL BE PUBLISHED IN DECEMBER.



**BECAUSE SHE GRIEVED BY GIVING**

DETROIT

Earlier this year, Kaylan Waterman realized a “sharing table” belonged in her hometown: She started offering toiletries, food, and cleaning supplies on a folding table in her front yard to anyone who wanted them. “There was definitely a lot of confusion and suspicion in the beginning,” she says of the “take what you need and leave what you can, if you can” sustainable-giving approach. But neighbors soon embraced having a communal spot to grab a box of granola bars or just greet a familiar face. The table, which Kaylan now runs with the assistance of two neighbors, also helped her mourn and mobilize during the protests for racial justice: “I wanted to grieve actively and nontraditionally for the innocent lives of my people,” she says. “The sharing table has been my way to do that.”

**BECAUSE SHE’S HAPPY TO GIVE YOU A LIFT**

DUNLAP, TENNESSEE

For years, Vandy Gibson has made it her mission to run errands for people in need. “It started when I picked up groceries and medication for a homebound neighbor,” she says. That single good deed led to another, then another—quickly cementing Vandy’s status as her neighborhood’s unofficial aide. “I help others almost daily,” she says. The mom of four has pitched in with yard work, grocery runs, and cleaning. She once even drove a woman struggling with drug addiction to a recovery center two hours away. “She’s now 20 months clean, with her own home and a job,” Vandy says.

**BECAUSE A HAIRSTYLIST BRINGS BEAUTY TO THE STREETS**

LOS ANGELES

After the death of her 2-year-old son, Shirley Raines suffered from depression for decades. In an attempt to recover, she founded Beauty 2 the Streetz, an organization that provides haircuts, hot meals, showers, tents, and sleeping bags to homeless and trans people in L.A.’s Skid Row neighborhood. “I needed to give my pain some purpose,” she says. “We offer anything we can to make our community feel loved, valued, beautiful, and seen.”



**Because My Neighbor Is My Lifeline Right Now**

**B**ACK IN THE SPRING, I met with a local fence builder. Masks on, six feet apart, we walked the perimeter of the backyard and discussed what sections needed replacing and how to guard against the deer who regularly leap over five-foot-high walls if there is even a single hosta to be eaten on the other side. When we got to a stretch on the south side where only a short, sloping wall divides the patio from our neighbor’s porch, he asked if I wanted to close the gap with fencing. “You’d have more privacy,” he said.

We live in a neighborhood in suburban New York where the houses are right on top of one another; it was a big reason we were so charmed by the area 17 years ago, and we accepted that it came with some compromises.

I told the well-meaning fence guy no way.

That fenceless stretch is the spot where, over the years, my neighbor Lori and I have exchanged the day-

to-day necessities of living: flour, a roll of packing tape, a quarter cup of chicken broth, and more parenting advice than I can recount. I was seven months pregnant with my second daughter when Lori first leaned over that fence to introduce herself. She was a mother of four—three girls, one boy—and spoke with authority about the things that worried me, like the age when girls need their moms the most. She seemed to know things I didn’t.

During quarantine, our exchanges kicked into a higher gear, this time with Lori’s 24-year-old daughter, Logan, who was 7 when I first met her across the fence. Everyone was limiting their trips to the supermarket, and most local businesses were closed. Over the wall went lemons, soccer ball pumps, logs for the firepit, baking soda (we joked that we hoped the DEA wasn’t monitoring us), and tomato plant seedlings for our victory gardens. It was a symbiotic relationship: In April, when I needed to borrow vanilla extract to make a birthday cake, it arrived with a beribboned bottle and card; the next day, what remained of the birthday cake went right back over the wall.

Was it about the food? Sure. (Isn’t everything?) But mostly it was nice to know that we were, as always, in it together, looking out for each other.

JENNY ROSENSTRACH IS A NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING COOKBOOK AUTHOR. *THE WEEKDAY VEGETARIANS* WILL BE PUBLISHED IN 2021.

## BECAUSE PLASTIC HAS A NEW PURPOSE

FLINT, MICHIGAN

Soon after Flint's contaminated-water crisis started making headlines, Ali Rose VanOverbeke began passing out cases of bottled water to the city's residents. Granted, she didn't feel great about adding so much single-use plastic to the waste stream. So in April 2018, she founded Genusee, an eyewear company that upcycles plastic bottles into glasses. "Once you see a problem like that, it's hard to look away," Ali says of the excess bottles—15 of which go into making a pair of specs. Genusee has so far kept more than 60,000 water bottles out of landfills.



## Because My Fourth-Grade Teacher Became My Pen Pal

**L**AST YEAR, MY PARENTS handed me a box of my memorabilia, unearthed from their basement. As I idly shuffled through it, I came across my fourth-grade report card—and froze when I read a comment from my teacher, Mrs. Manley. "Jancee writes so well," she had inscribed in beautiful cursive. "I wouldn't be surprised if she grows up to be a writer."

Mrs. Manley called it! A flood of memories overwhelmed me—feeling so pleased when my parents read what she'd written, her gentle support and firm belief that I had a talent that might take me places.

It was certainly not obvious. I was a middling student, and too shy to speak up. But she could see in my fourth-grade writing the person I was trying hard to be: someone confident and quick-witted, someone with potential. Back then, I didn't even know a person could write for

a living. As I held that faded report card, I realized she had instilled the idea in me.

I couldn't stop thinking about her. She had undoubtedly retired, but was she still alive?

She was! I tracked her down and sent her a long letter, thanking her for her faith in me. I told her I had written seven books, my latest a picture book for kids, about a teddy bear and his stuffed-animal friends who make mischief in a school.

Within days, I received a card featuring a kitten sniffing a daisy. "How wonderful to hear from you!" Mrs. Manley replied in her same elegant handwriting. She was in her 80s, lively as ever, active in the church and her SilverSneakers fitness class. She had lost her husband a few years earlier but was determined, she wrote, to stay upbeat.

I wrote back right away, and now Mrs. Manley is my pen pal. Recently, I sent her a package—a brand-new copy of the children's book I had told her about, *I'm Afraid Your Teddy Is in the Principal's Office*. I had dedicated it to her.

A few days later, a card arrived in the mail. "You have made my day—my week—my year!" she wrote. "Of course, I'm thrilled with your book's dedication, but I truly love the story of Teddy and his fun-loving friends." I am firmly in midlife, but I felt a surge of pride, as if Mrs. Manley had given me an A.

JANCEE DUNN IS A *NEW YORK TIMES* BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF SEVEN BOOKS FOR ADULTS AND CHILDREN.

## BECAUSE WE FOUND A BIRTHDAY FAIRY

EDEN PRAIRIE, MINNESOTA

Disappointed that the pandemic prevented her from celebrating her grandmother's 67th birthday at a nearby nursing home, 10-year-old Eleanor Johnson began leaving personalized presents for seniors and children on porches throughout their Twin Cities suburb and beyond. "Birthdays are very special in our family, so I wanted to make them feel special for others too," Eleanor says of her self-appointed role of birthday fairy. "Seeing people smile inspires me to give more and more."



## BECAUSE A DUDE ON A PADDLEBOARD IS CLEANING RIVERS

ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA

While plying the Potomac River on his stand-up paddleboard in 2019, Joe Wright spotted a takeout container in a plastic bag floating in the water. The next morning, he returned to paddle—and brought a milk crate to corral such trash. "I was tired of seeing garbage and thinking someone else should do something about it," says Joe, who documents his trash collection efforts at @sup.garbage.man. To date, he's removed 1,841 cubic feet of trash from the waterways, he says. But don't call him an environmentalist: "I clean up for the simple fact that trash doesn't belong in a river," he says. "I'm just a dude with a paddleboard doing my part."

COURTESY OF JOE WRIGHT (@SUP.GARBAGE.MAN)

## BECAUSE PHONE PALS ARE TALKING

PLANO, TEXAS

Quarantined seniors now have a social outlet, thanks to Plano's Senior Care Calls initiative. The program connects isolated elders with city staffers through biweekly 15-minute phone calls. Though once the calls get going—and friendships form—many gabfests extend well beyond 15 minutes. "The seniors I talk to are very concerned with how I'm doing," says library support supervisor Holly Ryckman. "That's been an unexpected development of these calls—how much they care about us."

## BECAUSE FUTURE EDUCATORS HELPED WITH HOMEWORK

AKRON, OHIO

When Covid-19 forced public school classes to move online, Cheyenne Oechsle and Matthew Derksen, education majors at the University of Akron, quickly rallied. The student teachers are no strangers to the struggles of remote learning, so they recruited 22 undergrad volunteers to create a K-12 homework hotline. The team offered 30-minute tutoring sessions to more than 100 schoolkids in Ohio. "One father was a medical worker who had little time to help his children with their schoolwork," Matthew says. "He logged into the video session to thank us for our work, which was humbling coming from someone who was literally out there saving lives."