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RANDOM ACTS OF KINDESS BRIGHTEN DAYS OF FAYETTE COUNTY RESIDENTS

Uniontown, PA – When February rolls around, a lot of people start thinking about Valentine’s Day and romantic love. But February also highlights love of your neighbor and fellow man, as Random Acts of Kindness Day is celebrated Feb. 17. Fayette County residents know all about making the world a better place.

Some, like Zelma Kassimer, perform acts of kindness in honor of a loved one. Kassimer’s son, Steve, passed away in 2020 at the age of 35. His family and close friends started the World of Good Foundation in his memory and to honor his giving nature.

“He was just that kind of a guy,” Kassimer said, noting that he would sometimes call his wife and tell her she may notice money missing from their bank account, as he had spent it to, for example, cover the cost of groceries for someone who was short at the checkout.

Kassimer said World of Good is all about random acts of kindness and performs those in numerous ways, such as through charity golf outings, blood drives and community support.

“My part is an old stove, a kitchen that’s not big enough, and a basement that is overrun with takeout containers,” she joked.

Kassimer cooks mainly for “gentlemen of a certain age who did not grow up in a kitchen.” Calling her endeavor “Kaz’s Kitchen,” she cooks and packages full meals each week – including dessert – and even includes a note with expiration dates and reheating instructions. Her husband delivers the goods.

“If you knew my son, food was his friend,” Kassimer said of choosing to honor him in this way. “It started with just a neighbor down the street, and then we added my father. At one point, I was cooking for seven widowers every week or every other week.”

Kassimer said Kaz’s Kitchen is a way to honor her son that is “as fun and light-hearted as possible and keeps his memory alive in the hearts of others.”

Other random acts of kindness are just done to provide encouragement or to cheer up someone when they need it most. Brandie VanDusen and her husband started Fayette Outreach in 2018 for that very reason.

“We just had the sense that we wanted to give back in some way,” she said, noting that the couple had been donating to good causes and volunteering, but felt as though it wasn’t enough. “It just kind of

clicked, after we were brainstorming, about random acts of kindness. Everyone loves random acts of kindness.”

VanDusen said though they occasionally will get stopped and thanked by someone, she and her husband don't seek recognition and ask only that those they help pay it forward. She said kindness offers a little bit of hope, especially when people are at their lowest or going through a trying time.

“It lets them know love does exist in this world and good things are coming their way,” she said.

VanDusen pointed out it's not about an expensive gift or a complicated task. Kindness can be something as simple as paying for a McDonald's order for a family with limited funds or babysitting for a friend who is a single mom so she can get some much-needed alone time. She said those are things that come to mind “because I was there. Don't forget about where you came from.”

Fayette Outreach is all about performing acts of kindness throughout the community, whether it's anonymously dropping off laundry detergent at a laundromat or celebrating National Ice Cream Day by providing ice cream to kids at the youth shelter.

For Random Acts of Kindness Day on Saturday, the culmination of Random Acts of Kindness Week, VanDusen said Fayette Outreach will be doing more of the same.

“We're just going to be doing a lot of that stuff,” she said, noting she and her husband likely will perform such acts as delivering flowers to residents of the women's shelter and posting a QR code on the organization's Facebook page that will act as a gift card to somewhere like Dunkin', allowing users to get themselves a small treat.

“Doing something good for somebody, you just get this warm feeling inside,” VanDusen said. “It helps them, but it secretly helps you, too.”

Jayden Howes, 14, and her stepmother try to perform acts of kindness anytime they see an opportunity, such as handing out water to people working outdoors on a hot day. Recently, the two went to the newly opened Chipotle restaurant in Uniontown planning to give out flowers, something they do often. They noticed a crew of flustered workers, some of whom appeared to be high school students, trying and failing to keep up with a deluge of customers. Howes said the gesture of kindness definitely made an impact on the frustrated workers.

“People's faces lit up when we passed out the flowers. They all seemed super happy and not expecting it,” she said. “One person almost cried because they were having a bad day and told us this really made a difference for them.”

Howes said the gestures are always unexpected; at Chipotle, once over the surprise, restaurant workers even asked to take pictures with Howes and her stepmother.

Howes and her stepmother, though, “have been doing it so long, we kind of know what to expect. We have a blast handing them out. At one point, we handed out everything we bought, and I asked my stepmom if we could buy some more.”

Howes said seeing everyone so happy also brightens her own day. “We love seeing everyone happy, and it makes us happy, too,” she said. “We get nervous right before we hand them out but always end up going away laughing and smiling. It’s so much fun to just make people happy.”

It’s pretty great for those on the receiving end, too, as Becky Ritenour of Indian Head recently found out. Ritenour and her husband were shopping at Westmoreland Mall when she was approached by a young girl holding a flower and a card.

“My husband and I stopped at the mall and had just started walking around when I noticed a woman and girl coming toward us,” Ritenour said. “The woman had what looked to be at least a dozen roses in her arm, and the girl had just one rose in her hand. As we got closer, the little girl came toward me with the rose held out. She gave it to me, along with a little paper that said, “Thank you for being you.” I was surprised and didn’t know what to say at first, but then I stopped and thanked her for the flower.”

Ritenour said she was a bit confused, as she had first thought the woman simply was carrying her own flowers. “When it dawned on me that they were passing them out to random people and that I was being given the rose “just because,” I thought it was so sweet,” she said. “And the little girl who handed it to me was absolutely adorable, so I wanted to make sure I thanked her and told her how nice it was of her to do that.”

Ritenour said while she gives gifts and does kindnesses as often as she can, it threw her off a bit to be the one receiving a gift. “It was a very pleasant surprise, though, and I got to continue sharing that moment because several people at the mall commented on the flower, so I was able to tell about the random act of kindness to others,” she said.

Do you have a random acts of kindness story? How have you brought kindness into someone’s life? What gift has been given to you? Share your experience on our Facebook page at www.facebook.com/FayetteCoPA.

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