



We're all just walking each other home.

— Ram Dass

# KINDNESS HAPPENS HERE



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Volume 1 • Issue 1

NEWS OF A KINDER WORLD

November | December 2025

**INSIDE, PAGE 4**

Staff Writer Jeannette De Wyze shares the love, loss and greater good of raising companion puppies.



*Kindness Happens Here* publishes monthly January through October, with a combined November/December issue.

**COMING IN JANUARY**

Staff Writer Lisa Petrillo explores innovative programs addressing the growing problem of aging baby boomers who lack family and resources.



Without kindness for others and for yourself, it's impossible to be truly wise.

— Dilip V. Jeste

## what is WISDOM & WHERE can i get some?



STORY BY SCOTT LA FEE  
ILLUSTRATION BY CRISTINA BYVIK

Wisdom is not intelligence. A lot of very smart people are not particularly wise.

Nor is wisdom a matter of age. As Oscar Wilde opined, “Wisdom comes with age, but sometimes age comes alone.”

Ask an intelligent person or older person what they think wisdom is, and you're likely to get many different answers, most of which boil down to the idea that we all know wisdom when we see it.

For millennia, philosophers, poets and pundits have pondered the meaning and nature of wisdom, which is a universal aspiration. In every culture in every time, becoming wise has been seen as a good and noble thing.

But only relatively recently has empirical science taken a crack at defining wisdom. Dilip V. Jeste, MD, a retired professor of psychiatry and neurosciences at UC San Diego who is currently director of the Global Research Network

In conversation with Dilip V. Jeste

**HOW WISE ARE YOU?**

Wisdom takes many forms — empathy, open-mindedness, self-control. Discover your own strengths by taking the [Jeste-Thomas wisdom quiz here](#).

See COVER STORY, Page 8

# Walking Beside Ron

*The Birth of a Friendship — and a New Way of Seeing*

By Leigh Fenly  
Staff Writer

On a cool, overcast September morning at the Tijuana Estuary, Ron Peterson, his guide dog Gidget and I strolled a path lined by willow trees and stands of California buckwheat. Beyond were the shallow, rich waters of the wetlands. The conversation turned to how we had met.

It was sheer chance. Ron was hiking at Torrey Pines State Natural Reserve on Memorial Day, 2023. As a volunteer docent there, I was stationed at the trail head, fielding questions.



ROBERT SCHNEIDER

**At the Tijuana Estuary reserve, Ron Peterson pauses along the trail he knows by sound, scent and memory.**

His for me: “Do you know anything about the plants here?”

I thought I did.

We walked to the native plant garden by the old lodge. Ron released Gidget from her harness, signaling she was off duty and could freely trail along behind us. We stopped at the bladderpod plant, and I guided Ron's hand to one of the inflated green pods that give the plant its name. He shook it with appreciation, listening for the satisfying rattle of the seeds inside.

He crushed a white sage leaf between two fingers and took lung-filling draws of its scent. We discussed which sage releases the most pleasing aroma. He prefers black sage, which is not as strong as white. I had to agree.

That day Ron was especially interested in how plants at Torrey Pines differed from the ones he knew at the estuary. What he learns, he stores up

VIDEO / ROBERT SCHNEIDER

See COVER STORY, Page 7

# Because Kindness Belongs On The Front Page

Welcome to the debut of *Kindness Happens Here*. Each month, this free online newspaper — without advertising or paywalls — will bring you stories of individuals, businesses and organizations in the San Diego region that embody kindness. The newspaper is produced by journalists who have covered San Diego for decades and who believe, as I do, that in a time of great division, perhaps the one thing we can all agree on is kindness.

My professional life has always been in journalism. For 35 years — 30 of those at *The San Diego Union-Tribune* — I was an editor and staff writer. I know the power of a good story to shape how we see our city and each other. But newspapers, of course, focus on news, so a lot of great stories never get the spot-

light they deserve. *Kindness Happens Here* is meant to shine that light.

I also come to this work with a background in non-profits. Twenty years ago, with my friend Win Cox, I co-founded Women's Empowerment International (WE), which provides microfinance loans to women in poverty. To date the organization has given \$2.8 million in grants across San Diego, Mexico, Central America and Africa. My experience at WE taught me that giving is a two-way street. Recipients benefit, but so do donors. It just feels good to be kind and think of others.

To create *Kindness Happens Here*, I reached out to former colleagues and longtime friends in journalism. Together, we want to surprise and inspire you

by introducing you to the many San Diegans who make our region a better place.

We invite you to join in. Look for the Your Turn logo inside these pages for ways to participate — by sharing your own stories of volunteering or by answering our monthly question. Most of all, please share this newspaper with your friends. It will always remain free.

San Diego is a place full of kindness, if only we pause to notice it. Thank you for opening this first issue. We hope you will find in these pages stories that lift your spirits and remind you that kindness happens here.

*With gratitude,*  
Leigh Fenly, Founder and Editor

## How a Dry Cleaner's Kindness Sparked a Newspaper

By Leigh Fenly  
Staff Writer

As has been their custom throughout their married life, Karla and Salvador Villarreal decided to create the sign together. It was post-Covid and “people were suffering,” Salvador told me.

“People have always helped us,” Karla added. “So we wanted to give back.”

You can still see the sign today, posted on the window of VIP Cleaners where Karla and Salvador are proprietors. “If you are unemployed and need an outfit cleaned for an interview, we will clean it for free.” The tagline reads “When times are tough, we will help you look your best.”

I first saw the sign about a year ago and, crazy as it sounds, it led directly to the creation of *Kindness Happens Here*. At that time, my clothes dryer was on the blink so I had made an emergency visit to VIP with my dirty laundry. I stood in front of the sign for several moments. I took a photo of it.

Who knows why simple moments change us? Who knows what will move our hearts?

Over months, I realized I needed to do something in the spirit of the Villarreal's kindness. With the encouragement of friends, family and fellow journalists, I developed this newspaper that focuses on kind people like them.

### CARE THAT MATTERS

When I asked how many customers had asked for the free cleaning, Salvador thought a minute, then said, “Oh, not many. Maybe 50?”

I thought that was quite a lot.

They both remembered one customer in particular. “He had a suit and a couple of shirts,” Karla remembered. “We cleaned them for him, and he went on the interview but he didn't get the job. So we cleaned them again for the next inter-



ROBERT SCHNEIDER PHOTOS

Karla and Salvador Villarreal opened VIP Cleaners on Morena Boulevard in 2015 and estimate that they have helped at least 50 job seekers.

view. Eventually he was hired.”

Now, with a good job, he returns again and again.

“He has asked us so many times if he can pay for those times we cleaned for free, but I won't let him do that,” Salvador said. “So now when he comes in, he leaves \$20 tips.”

The couple chose the dry cleaning business because they believed superior customer service would lead to success. Clearly, the sign aligns with their values and the kind of people they are.

“We get so excited when someone comes in and asks for the free cleaning,” Karla said.

“That's just really big for us,” Salvador added.



**Kindness Happens Here  
Recognizes  
Karla and Salvador  
Villarreal for  
Kindness in Business**

*Kindness Happens Here* is proud to recognize Karla and Salvador Villarreal, owners of VIP Cleaners on Morena Boulevard, with the first *Kindness Happens Here* Award in Business.

Through years of thoughtful service, the Villarreals have shown that every business plan can make room for kindness — and that success grows when care for others is built into daily work.

If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.”  
— African proverb (Origin unknown)

## Contributors

# Meet the Team



### FOUNDER & EDITOR

#### LEIGH FENLY

Leigh Fenly was a staff writer and editor at *The San Diego Union-Tribune* for 30 years, where she edited the award-winning Quest science section. She is co-founder and past co-president of Women’s Empowerment International, a nonprofit that provides microfinance loans and other support to women across the world. She has volunteered as a tutor for refugee children and at her neighborhood food pantry. Currently, she is a volunteer docent at Torrey Pines State Natural Reserve.

### COPY EDITOR

#### MARGARET KING

Margaret King has worked since 2009 as a writer and editor for Sally Ride Science, a nonprofit based at UC San Diego that seeks to inspire girls and boys of all backgrounds in STEM (science, technology, engineering and math).

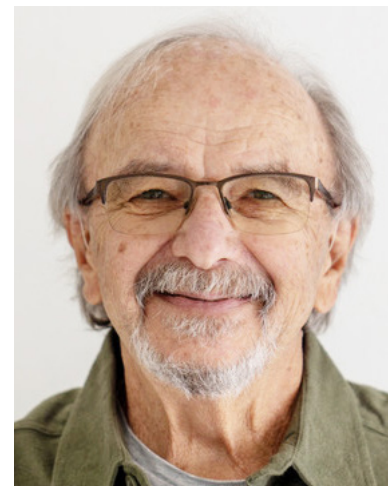
Previously, she was an editor at *The San Diego Union-Tribune*. She received her bachelor’s degree in English and history from UC Berkeley and her master’s degree in journalism from Columbia.



### PHOTOGRAPHER

#### ROBERT SCHNEIDER

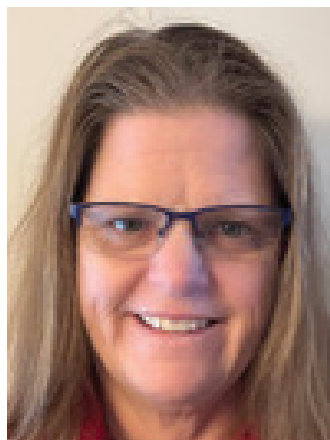
Robert Schneider retired as professor emeritus at Southwestern College after teaching photography for 33 years. During his tenure, he co-created a film and video production curriculum. He served as a founding board member of the Museum of Photographic Arts in Balboa Park. He was also a founding member of the Binational Association of Schools of Communications, which comprised colleges and universities from both sides of the border. He continues his involvement with photography and video production.



### DESIGNER

#### AMY STIRNKORB

Amy Stirnkorb is an art director and designer. After a decade at *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, she launched her own design studio and cookbook publishing company. She has been involved with a number of nonprofits including Women’s Empowerment International, Rescue House, American Sewing Guild, and in 2023 co-founded Educreate to inspire and empower young creators through art and technology.



### ILLUSTRATOR

#### CRISTINA BYVIK

Cristina Byvik is an award-winning illustrator and designer who has worked with clients such as *The Washington Post*, Starbucks and The Old Globe Theatre. Most recently she served as the graphics director at *The San Diego Union-Tribune*. She has received recognition for her illustrations, designs and information graphics from the Society of News Design. Cristina grew up in the Republic of Panama and has a B.F.A. in illustration from Ringling College of Art and Design. A lifelong futbol fan, she lives in Encinitas with her husband, son and golden retriever.



### COMMUNITY OUTREACH

#### WINIFRED COX

Winifred Cox has served as public relations director for a variety of businesses and nonprofits, including UC San Diego, and has provided pro bono work for numerous San Diego organizations. Winifred co-founded the nonprofit Women’s Empowerment International with Leigh Fenly, editor of *Kindness Happens Here*.



### READERS’ RESPONDER

#### DANIELLE DIAZ

Danielle Diaz is an entrepreneur and lifelong storyteller whose love for journalism began when she was editor-in-chief of her high school newspaper. Today, she brings that same passion for meaningful connection to her work and community, celebrating the beauty of everyday kindness and the people who make it happen.



### STAFF WRITERS

#### MARY CURRAN-DOWNEY

Mary Curran-Downey has been interviewing people her whole life — and writing those stories for radio, magazines and newspapers for more decades than she cares to disclose. Her sons are now grown and flown, so she concentrates on reading, quilting, traveling, spending time with friends and family — and always, always asking questions and interviewing everyone she meets.



#### JEANNETTE DE WYZE

Jeannette De Wyze worked as a staff writer at the *San Diego Reader* for 30 years. Today, in addition to raising puppies to be service dogs for Canine Companions, she’s a frequent contributor to the Friends of Bonobos blog. She and her husband also serve as the volunteer liaisons between Women’s Empowerment International and the Nyaka Grannies Project in Uganda. She travels often and maintains an active travel blog, [At Home and Abroad](#).



#### SCOTT LAFEE

Scott LaFee is vice president of communications at Sanford Burnham Prebys. Previously, he was director of media relations for health sciences research at UC San Diego. Before that for 18 years, he was a science writer/editor for the *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, covering all scientific disciplines for the Quest science section. With Dilip Jeste, MD, he is co-author of “Wiser: The Scientific Roots of Wisdom, Compassion and What Makes Us Good” (2020)



#### LISA PETRILLO

Lisa Petrillo is an award-winning journalist, science writer and author devoted to reading and discovery and her adopted California home. She’s a former competitive figure skater who has written extensively about murder and mayhem, the space program, the wonders of physics and the world’s most powerful lasers.



## Love, Loss and the Greater Good of Puppy-Raising

# The Dogs We Don't Keep

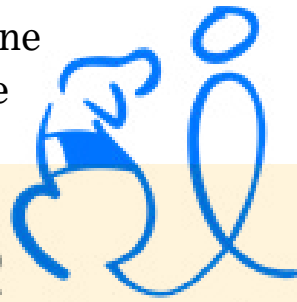
By Jeannette De Wyze  
Staff Writer

Twenty years ago in January, my husband Steve and I walked into the regional headquarters of Canine Companions in Oceanside and returned home with a sturdy yellow 8-week-old puppy named Tucker. It was the start of a whole new type of relationship for us.

Dog-lovers and owners for almost all our marriage, we would be Tucker's puppy-raisers. We'd only have him for 16 months, then give him back, so he could enter advanced training that would prepare him to serve someone in need.

For us, Tucker was the first in a series of unforgettable housemates. The most recent — puppy number 12 — was a blonde beauty named Vanessa. Over time, people have confronted us with one question more than any other. "How can you bear to give them up?" they ask, incredulous.

How to give away a beloved family member that you've raised from babyhood is one of the things we've



**Canine Companions**

- Canine Companions pioneered the modern service-dog industry beginning in 1975. It provides highly trained service dogs free of charge to children, adults and veterans with physical disabilities.
- It has seven centers around the U.S., including one in Oceanside and headquarters in Santa Rosa.
- Volunteers raise puppies, sit puppies, care for breeder dogs and help with events and community outreach. Volunteer pilots even transport puppies to their new homes across the country.
- To volunteer, contact Gwen Seah, volunteer coordinator, at [gseah@canine.org](mailto:gseah@canine.org)

learned from our years of volunteering. You can do it because you promised you would. It's painful. I feel deeply sad for at least a week before we have to say goodbye to each one. More often than not, one or both of us cries. But we know each puppy we raise is not our dog. And if a puppy graduates, it can change people's lives in profound ways.

That was one reason we started puppy-raising — for that shot at helping someone to whom life has dealt a bad hand. But it was hardly the only reason. We loved the idea of having a dog in our life and also being able to travel. (Part of the army of Canine Companions volunteers are folks who will puppy-sit for puppy-raisers when they're on the road.)

Another reason was how sick I was of watching our own dogs grow old and become so ill we felt it was kindest to have them put down. We'd made that decision several times, and every time it was devastating.

Puppy-raising has taught me lessons I didn't expect to learn. The biggest has been about the surprising ways in which dogs can connect people. I've come to like and even love other puppy-raisers, even though I know virtually nothing about their jobs or politics or religion or opinions of current events. Wrangling puppies together, trying to civilize them, lets us become friends despite not knowing any of that other stuff.

As puppy-raisers, we connect with lots of other people, too — folks who stop us on the street or ask questions about our dogs in the grocery store or the coffee shop. Usually these brief, warm conversations give me a little jolt of happiness.

I expected puppy-raising to make me more skilled at dog-training. That has happened (if not well enough.) But I've been surprised by what I've learned about the richness of all those puppies' personalities. They're not human. But they're all so different from one another, so complicated and predictable and surprising and trusting. They make me want to put up with a lot to take care of them.



COURTESY JEANNETTE DE WYZE

Jeannette De Wyze and Steve Wolfe with Vanessa, the 12th puppy the couple has raised for Canine Companions.

## YOUR TURN

### We Want to Hear Your Story

We invite you, our readers, to share your personal stories of volunteering. Tell us in about 500 words how you benefited and what you learned. Include a photo and background information on the organization that provided your volunteer experience. We will pick one of your stories for this space each month. We're looking forward to hearing from you. Send your story to [info@kindnesshappenshere.org](mailto:info@kindnesshappenshere.org)

“

I've learned that you shouldn't go through life with a catcher's mitt on both hands. You need to be able to throw something back.

— Maya Angelou

JOHN MATHEW SMITH & CELEBRITY-PHOTOS.COM



Maya Angelou

## Happy to Help

### VOLUNTEERS FEEL BETTER AND LIVE LONGER

Volunteering increases personal well-being, life satisfaction and feelings of social connectedness, according to studies from The London School of Economics (LSE).

Signing up for a volunteer gig might even have an impact on how long you live. In studies that controlled for age, gender and physical health, researchers found

that people who volunteered had lower mortality rates than those who did not.

The volunteer benefit package also comes with better mental health, as volunteers report reduced depression, stress and anxiety, especially among people 65 and older. When volunteers foster new relationships, they strengthen their ties to community

and feel less isolated and lonely.

Volunteers who work most consistently reap the biggest benefits. One LSE study found a positive link between the frequency of volunteering and how happy people reported being. The sweet spot may be a weekly commitment. Weekly volunteers were among the happiest of volunteers.

Personal Stories, Opportunities and  
the Benefits of Giving Back

## Kindness In Action

### CITIZEN SCIENCE

# Join the Search for Endangered Sea Stars

By Leigh Fenly  
Staff Writer

Welcome to Citizen Science. Each month, this space highlights a project that invites San Diegans to get outdoors, look closely and contribute real data to science. Citizen science happens when everyday observers lend their eyes and ears to help researchers track our changing world — no lab coat required.

Across the globe, thousands of people now take part in citizen science projects, expanding what we know about ocean health, urban wildlife and animal migration. Those observations reveal patterns — especially crucial when species are threatened and the climate is shifting.

#### THE SOLSTICE SEA STAR SEARCH

This winter, a consortium of California aquariums and labs is asking coastal visitors to look for sea stars and help document a rebound in their numbers. Between 2013 and 2014, a fast-spreading wasting disease devastated many West Coast sea star populations. Sunflower sea stars — among the world's largest — were hit especially hard. Because these sea stars prey on sea urchins, the die-off allowed urchins to multiply unchecked and devour kelp forests.

Researchers from Birch Aquarium at Scripps, the California Academy of Sciences, Aquarium of the Pacific, San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance and the Sunflower Star Laboratory are collaborating on recovery efforts. In 2024, the team achieved a key milestone by spawning and cross-fertilizing sunflower sea stars in captivity — progress toward one day returning lab-reared juveniles to native kelp forests.

#### JOIN THE SEARCH

The groups are inviting the public to photograph sea stars in California tide pools during the winter solstice low tides and share their observations on the iNaturalist app. [Click here to visit the iNaturalist website and for details on downloading the app.](#) You can read more about the project at the [California Academy of Sciences' Solstice Sea Star Search website.](#)

#### HOW TO PARTICIPATE

- Download the iNaturalist app and create an account.
- Head to a local tide pool during low tide between roughly Dec. 20 and Jan. 5.
- Photograph any sea stars you find — up close, but without touching or moving them.



CALIFORNIA ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

“Citizen scientists” — that could be you! — are encouraged to photograph sea stars during low tides in San Diego tide pools, Dec. 20 through Jan. 5.

- Upload your photos and add them to the Solstice Sea Star Search project.

More people looking means more chances to learn what's out there — and to help bring these important predators back.

#### RESOURCES FOR PLANNING YOUR OUTING

- [San Diego County tide pool locations](#)
- [Safe low-tide exploring tips from the National Park Service and Cabrillo National Monument](#)
- [Download Tide Chart app](#) or check [NOAA Tides & Currents website](#) before you go.

#### HOW INATURALIST WORKS

iNaturalist turns your phone into a field notebook and identification guide. When you upload a photo, the app suggests possible species and connects you with a global community that helps confirm IDs. Verified observations feed a worldwide biodiversity database used in research and conservation planning.



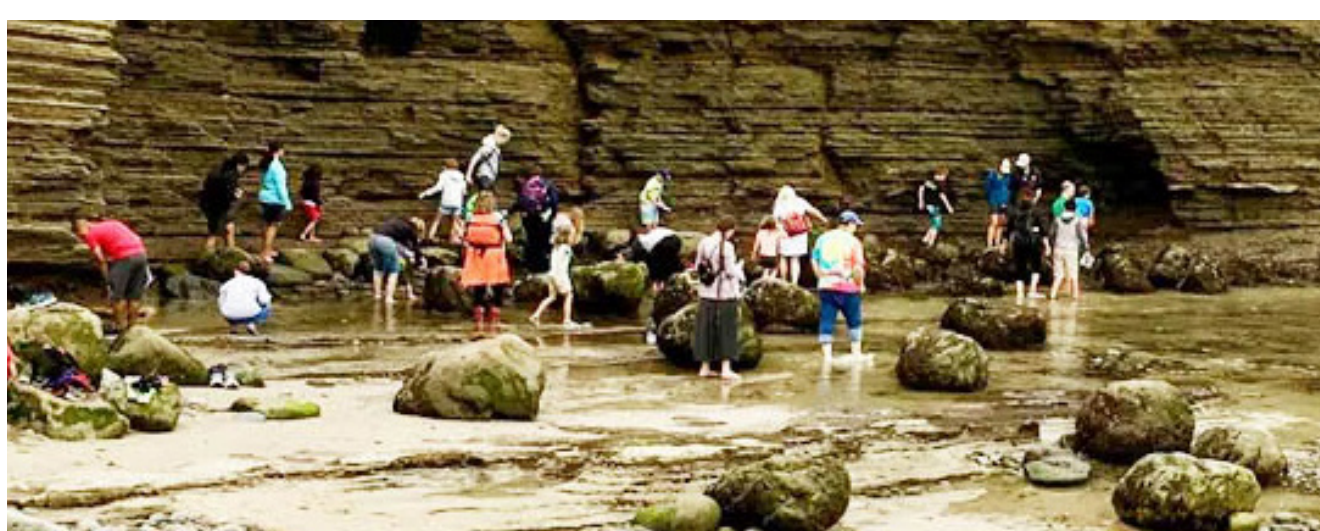
BIRCH AQUARIUM

Sunflower sea stars, now considered threatened along the West Coast, can grow as large as a bicycle tire.

### YOUR TURN

Did you join the Solstice Sea Star Search? Tell us what you found — or what surprised you most when you looked closely at a tide pool. Email reflections (and photos!) to [info@kindnesshappenshere.org](mailto:info@kindnesshappenshere.org). We'll share a few highlights in a future column.

## Find the Perfect Opportunity for you



NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Cabrillo Monument trains volunteers to educate visitors about tide pools.

#### Volunteer.gov

Sign up to be a tide pool educator or park rover at Cabrillo National Monument. This site links volunteers to opportunities, both in person and virtual, in federal agencies, such as the National Park Service, National Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management.



Hands On San Diego  
[handsonsandiego.org](http://handsonsandiego.org)

Your gateway to San Diego nonprofits. Here you can find one-time or ongoing opportunities for individuals or groups, adults, teens or kids.

#### Idealist [idealist.org](http://idealist.org)

Spend your Saturdays helping sort food at Feeding San Diego, or stitch up memory bears to comfort bereaved families. The volunteer opportunities are vast on the Idealist site.

## GUEST ESSAY

## Why Kindness Still Matters

By Lawrence Hinman

In a world that often seems to reward aggression, competition and self-interest, kindness can appear to be a weakness — a soft virtue for softer times. Yet nothing could be further from the truth.

Kindness is one of the most powerful forces available to us, capable of transforming individuals, communities and even societies. It costs nothing to give, yet its value is immeasurable. Understanding the importance of kindness means recognizing it not as mere niceness or politeness, but as an active choice that shapes the fabric of human connection and determines the quality of our shared existence.

At its core, kindness is an expression of our shared humanity. When we act with kindness, we acknowledge that the person before us has feelings, struggles and dreams just as real as our own. This recognition breaks down the barriers of isolation and alienation that characterize so much of modern life.

A simple act — holding a door, offering a genuine compliment, listening without judgment — sends a profound message: you matter, you are seen, you are not alone. In moments of kindness, we step outside the narrow confines of our own concerns and participate in something larger than ourselves.

## SMALL ACTS, BIG CHANGE

The ripple effects of kindness extend far beyond the immediate interaction. Research has shown that acts of kindness trigger the release of oxytocin and serotonin — chemicals that promote feelings of contentment and well-being in both the giver and receiver.

Witnesses to acts of kindness also experience elevation, an emotional state that inspires them to act kindly in turn. This creates a cascade effect in which a single generous gesture can multiply exponentially, touching lives in ways we may never fully comprehend. A teacher's encouraging word might inspire a student to pursue a dream. A stranger's smile might pull someone back from the edge of despair.

We vastly underestimate the power we hold to influence the trajectory of another person's day, or even their life.



COURTESY PHOTO

“Kindness builds the social capital that holds communities together. Trust, cooperation and mutual support do not emerge spontaneously; they are cultivated through countless small acts of consideration and care.”

— Lawrence Hinman

Moreover, kindness builds the social capital that holds communities together. Trust, cooperation and mutual support do not emerge spontaneously; they are cultivated through countless small acts of consideration and care. When neighbors help one another, when colleagues offer support during difficult times, when strangers extend help without expectation of reward, they create networks of reciprocity and goodwill.

These networks become the safety nets that catch us when we fall and the ladders that help us climb. In times of crisis, it is not the ruthless or the selfish who prove most valuable, but those who have cultivated relationships rooted in kindness and compassion.

## THE COURAGE TO BE KIND

Yet kindness should not be confused with passivity or the avoidance of difficult truths. True kindness sometimes requires courage — the courage to speak honestly, to set boundaries, to challenge injustice. It can mean caring enough to have uncomfortable conversations or to intervene when someone is being harmed.

Kindness toward oneself might mean saying no to unreasonable demands or walking away from toxic relationships. The goal is not to be liked by everyone or

to avoid all conflict, but to act from a place of genuine concern for the well-being of all involved.

Perhaps most importantly, kindness is a practice that transforms the one who gives it. Each time we choose kindness over indifference, patience over irritation or generosity over selfishness, we strengthen those qualities within ourselves. We become the kind of people we want to see in the world.

Viktor Frankl, a Holocaust survivor, wrote, “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms — to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances.” Even in the darkest moments, the choice to remain kind preserves our humanity and dignity.

In conclusion, kindness matters because people matter. It is both the oil that allows the machinery of society to function smoothly and the light that makes the journey worthwhile. It requires no special talents, no wealth, no power — only the willingness to see beyond ourselves and act with care.

In a complex world full of problems that seem too large to solve, kindness offers something we can all do, right now exactly where we are. It is both profoundly simple and radically transformative. The world we want to live in begins with the choices we make in each moment, and there is no choice more fundamental, or more important, than the choice to be kind.

*Lawrence Hinman is an emeritus professor of philosophy at the University of San Diego, where he taught for forty years. He has written books and articles on ethics and founded ethics centers. He has enjoyed it all, concentrating in the last two decades on ethical issues at the frontiers of science. [Click here for a more extensive biography.](#)*

## KINDNESS, ACCORDING TO YOU

## Who Made Your Day Brighter This Year?

By Danielle Diaz  
Readers' Responder

*Kindness Happens Here* isn't just about telling stories — it's also about hearing yours. Each month, we'll pose a kindness question to our community, inviting you to share your thoughts, experiences and everyday moments of compassion. From the smallest gestures that brightened your day to the big-hearted acts that restored your faith in humanity, your stories will remind us that kindness connects us all.

At the end of each month, we'll select

a few of your responses to feature here in *Kindness, According to You*. Think of it as a community conversation — one where your words inspire others to notice, appreciate and spread kindness in new ways.

Be on the lookout for our monthly question here — then email your answer by the 15th of each month to [info@kindnesshappenshere.org](mailto:info@kindnesshappenshere.org). You never know when your story might brighten a stranger's day.

Without further ado, here is our January question. We can't wait to read your answers.

## YOUR TURN

**What's a simple act of kindness someone showed you this past year that you'll never forget?**

I'll go first.

A few weeks ago, my husband and I were driving to Lake Havasu during a heavy rainstorm when the roads began to flood. Even after the rain stopped, we were stuck for hours alongside dozens of other cars.

Before long, everyone was out of their vehicles in the dark, checking on each oth-

er, sharing snacks and water, and making sure everyone stayed safe while we waited for CalTrans to clear the roads.

What could have been a long, stressful night turned into something unexpectedly heartwarming — a little makeshift community formed right there on the side of the highway.

Strangers became teammates, all looking out for one another. It reminded me that kindness doesn't always come from people we know; sometimes it comes from the person parked next to us in the rain, just trying to make sure we're okay.

# Cover Story: Walking Beside Ron

## CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

to share. “When I lost my vision in 2019,” he told me, “I made it a goal to learn to identify as many native plants as I could without sight and share that knowledge with others.”

He explained he led monthly nature hikes at the estuary visitor center in Imperial Beach, teaching others to appreciate native plants solely through the senses of touch, smell and hearing.

I couldn’t wait to sign up. As it turned out, one tour was not enough. I’ve accompanied him a handful of times, bringing my family and friends along. He even created a special tour for my fellow Torrey Pines docents.

Every time I experience something new.

## VELVET LEAVES AND EARS

That gray September day, for instance, I followed Ron to the back of the visitors center where he had something new to share. We stopped by an Indian mallow that was ablaze in lemony blooms. But for Ron the beauty of the plant was in the felt-like softness of the leaves.

“Touch them. Now touch Gidget’s ears,” he instructed. I did and felt a match of velvety goodness. He did the same. “I just love doing that,” he enthused. “That’s why the mallow is my favorite plant.”

For Ron, 74, this place — formally the Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve — is a second home of sorts. When he and his wife Darcy moved to Imperial Beach about a decade ago, he became a regular volunteer, clearing trails, uprooting invasive plants.

But six years ago, glaucoma stopped him, at least temporarily. He went from 20/20 vision to 95 percent blind in eight months “after failed surgeries, mistakes, bad luck,” he explained. With such limited sight, Ron couldn’t perform trail maintenance, but he wasn’t finished at the reserve.

He began to craft his immersive tour which came to be known as “An Eye-Opening Experience Without Sight.” With the help of the estuary’s volunteer coordinator, he learned to identify more than 30 native plants relying on his fingers, nose and ears. He trained Gidget to



With his guide dog, Gidget, at his side, Ron Peterson leads visitors through the Tijuana Estuary Reserve — showing there’s more than one way to truly see the natural world.

ROBERT SCHNEIDER PHOTOS

navigate his route, and developed tricks, like counting 29 steps to locate the willow trees.

The tour has found an appreciative audience. In addition to his regular monthly hikes for the public, Ron leads special tours, including fourteen last year for groups that provide services to the blind.

Giving back is the motivation. “Being kind to others is almost selfish because it brings meaning to one’s life,” he told me. “Other people go after power, money, fame — but I was lucky because I learned the real meaning of life from my father when I was just a boy.”

## LESSONS IN THE WOODS

Ron’s mother deserted the family when he was 10 years old.

“It was really bad,” he said, pausing, remembering, as we sat at one of the re-

serve’s picnic tables, where we had settled in for a good talk. “I was having a really rough time.

“Then one day my father sat down with me and explained the secret of how to be happy. He said the only way to be happy is to help others, to be kind to others. I believed him and I took it to heart.”

He wrote his father’s message on a piece of paper, folded it, wrote “happiness” on the outside and carried it with him until the note disintegrated years later. “I wish I still had that paper,” he said wistfully.

Through hikes in the woods near their Virginia home, his father fostered in Ron and his older brother, David, a love of nature and science.

“He taught us how to watch for venomous snakes, so it became automatic. We almost had this intuitive knowledge of when a snake might appear.”

One day the three were hiking when a swarm of hornets appeared out of nowhere. “We were probably 5 and 6 then. We weighed about a hundred pounds together. But he lifted us up under his arms and ran us out of there. I remember being so proud that my Dad could do that.”

Ron likes to say his father gave him three gifts. “He taught me about the spirit of giving, an appreciation of science and a love of nature.”

He drew on those gifts during the difficult days just after losing his sight, as he struggled to turn blindness from a deficit into an opportunity to help others.

“For a few months after I lost my vision, I was not happy. But as soon as I remembered the gifts of my father and I was able to put them into practice, everything got better. Now I am excited about every day, and my life is better than before I lost my sight.”

Beyond the estuary, Ron, a retired

## What is Glaucoma?

Glaucoma is the name of a group of diseases that can damage the optic nerve in the eye. It most commonly occurs when the fluid inside the eyes slowly rises and increases pressure. About 3 million Americans have the disease, and it is the second-leading cause of blindness worldwide. It can be treated but not cured.

Individuals with glaucoma may slowly lose peripheral vision; over time, central (straight-ahead) vision may also decrease.

Those ages 60 and older, especially of Hispanic and Latino descent, are at higher risk for glaucoma. Black individuals older than 40 and anyone with a family history of glaucoma are also at higher risk for the condition.

Treatments include medications that lower pressure inside the eye and surgery to improve fluid drainage.

An eye exam can determine the presence of glaucoma. The National Eye Institute recommends getting a comprehensive dilated eye exam every one to two years if you are at higher risk.

— National Institutes of Health

civilian engineer for the U.S. Navy, gives back through his embrace of technology. At the University of San Diego, he helps engineering students design projects to aid the visually impaired. He participates with faculty at Olin College of Engineering in Massachusetts to refine an app that helps the blind navigate indoor and outdoor spaces. Until recently, he taught classes in artificial intelligence at the Braille Institute. He serves as a guide and confidante for individuals who have recently lost their sight.

## CREATING A MEANINGFUL LIFE

Since our chance meeting at the Torrey Pines trailhead, I’ve learned so much from him, from his humility and especially his sense of purpose. Walking beside him has made me see nature — and kindness — in a whole new light. Sometimes I think if Ron can carry his father’s lessons from the Virginia woods to the wetlands of San Diego, maybe those lessons are available for me, too — and for you. I know Ron would be happy to share.

“I struggle with the word happiness,” he told me as we were saying goodbye, Gidget by his side for the walk home. “But I know what a meaningful life is. It’s being excited. How do you feel when you wake up? Do you just want to go back to bed or do you want to get right up? Do you want to immediately engage in your activities, in your service to others?”

He smiled. “Sometimes I wake up and I go straight to my computer. I’m just excited about what I can do that day.”

You can join Ron on his free tour at 11 a.m. the first Saturday of every month at the Tijuana Estuary Visitor Center, 301 Caspian Way, Imperial Beach, 619-575-3613

## Seeing Through Smarter Eyes

During a recent visit with my friend Ron Peterson, I asked him about the new glasses he was wearing. He told me they are [Ray-Ban Meta](#) smart glasses, which first came out in late 2023. They look like a regular pair of sunglasses, but they have cameras, microphones and tiny speakers built into the frames. They can take photos, record short videos, play music and respond to voice commands — all without the wearer needing to pick up a phone.



They cost about \$300, but Ron, as a beta tester, got his for free from Meta.

With Ron sitting across from me, I tried them on and asked a question. “Hey, Meta, what do you see?”

A male voice answered: “I see a man (Ron) wearing a cap and a light-colored shirt and behind him looks to be a natural setting with maybe trees and shrubs. On the table in front is a cell phone.”

Clever.

Ron primarily uses the glasses to listen to music, make phone calls and send emails. And he does it hands-free, while looking sharp in those timeless Ray-Bans.

— Leigh Fenly

# Cover Story: What Is Wisdom?

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

on Social Determinants of Mental Health and Exposomics, has been one of the pioneers in these efforts.

“Beginning in the 1970s, a handful of researchers began looking for evidence that wisdom consisted of discrete and measurable components, beginning with things like cognition, introspection and knowledge,” Jeste said in an interview. “Others added elements or refined them.”

A major advance came in 2010 when Jeste, with colleagues, published a seminal paper after asking international experts on wisdom to complete a two-phase survey to name the key characteristics of wisdom.

Their answers formed the beginnings of a consensus definition, with subsequent research refining the idea that wisdom is fundamentally a personality trait with biological and cognitive roots. This trait is the fruit of a collection of defined characteristics originating in specific regions of the brain.

Jeste and colleagues have developed a scale researchers have used to evaluate wisdom in individuals. You can take the survey to better understand your wisdom here.

In his 2020 book “Wiser,” which I co-authored, Jeste presents the history and neurobiology of wisdom and examines what the nature of wisdom portends for individuals and societies in the future.

“The key thing to know is that there is a growing consensus on the construct of wisdom, one that transcends time and cultures, and that this concept is largely based upon biology, which is measurable, and more profoundly it can be modified,” he said. “We have the knowledge now to learn how to become wiser, faster.”

## SEVEN WAYS TO WISE

In multiple published papers, Jeste and colleagues have outlined the seven identified components of wisdom:

**1. Pro-Social Behaviors:** The actions that benefit others, including empathy, compassion and altruism.

**2. Self-Reflection:** The ability to examine one’s own thoughts, feelings and actions and to learn from past experiences.

**3. Emotional Regulation:** The capacity to manage and control one’s emotions, especially in challenging situations.

**4. Acceptance of Diverse Perspectives:** The recognition and valuing of different viewpoints and opinions, even if they differ from one’s own.

**5. Decisiveness:** The ability to make sound judgments and decisions, even in the face of uncertainty.

**6. Social Advising:** The offer of helpful and rational advice to others, drawing upon one’s own experiences and knowledge.

**7. Spirituality:** A sense of connection to something larger than oneself, which can include religious or philosophical beliefs.

“These components are on display in persons who are deemed wise, though they can vary in degree in different individuals,” said Jeste.

## A CONVERSATION WITH Dilip V. Jeste, MD

ROBERT SCHNEIDER



**Do you recall when you first considered the possibility that wisdom could be scientifically parsed into measurable components?**

I had thought about the possibilities a lot but didn’t talk much about it with peers early in my career because people raised eyebrows, even laughed, at the mention of studying wisdom.

Once I became established as a scientist, I felt more comfortable pursuing my interest in wisdom and was delighted to find some very good work had been done at the Max Planck Institute in Germany and other institutions. Most was conducted by sociologists, gerontologists and psychologists. I wanted to look at wisdom from the perspective of medicine and neuropsychiatry, which was new.

I thought there was a biological basis to wisdom, that there was more to wisdom than just a measure of intelligence, social behav-

iors or linked to age. That perspective has become more commonly accepted in recent years. Empirical evidence now supports it.

**What is Artificial Wisdom?**

About five years ago, I was working with IBM and we published a paper on Artificial Wisdom — AW — and I’ve become more interested in that. With AW, we can address issues like loneliness in the world today. A robot cannot become compassionate, but AI computers have the capacity to understand people’s emotions. Robots can help people strengthen their compassion and social connections.

Can a robot be trained to practice psychotherapy? Absolutely. With AW, robots will be very good psychologists.

I believe AW is where the focus of research should be, starting tomorrow.

**What are you doing now? How has your past work informed your current activities?**

I retired from UC San Diego a few years ago, but I’m busier than ever. I’m editor of the journal *International Psychogeriatrics*, president-elect of the World Federation for Psychotherapy and director of the Global Research Network on Social Determinants of Mental Health and Exposomics, which investigates environmental exposures that affect people, such as air and water quality, food security, housing stability and workplace conditions.

These play key roles in health equity and improving overall health. In terms of mental health, one of the biggest determinants is loneliness, which is epidemic in much of the world today. The former U.S. Surgeon General Vivak Murthy said as much in 2023.

Loneliness is more than just a bad feeling. It’s a perceived and persistent social isolation or sense of missing meaningful connections with others.

Wisdom is an antidote to loneliness, in part because the components of wisdom fundamentally strengthen resistance to the drivers of loneliness. They can help prevent it.

Chief among these is compassion, which is arguably the most important part of being wise. If we care for and about each other, if there is empathy and grace in our dealings with family, friends and strangers, there is less likelihood of chronic or problematic loneliness. Who can be lonely when all around there is kindness?

— Scott LaFee

“For example, some wise people may be more quickly decisive than other wise people; some may be more spiritual. The components are all important, but the most important is undoubtedly compassion and empathy.

“Humans are social animals. We don’t do well alone, which is why the current epidemic of loneliness is so worrisome. Compassion is both the glue and lubrication of society. It helps us to better know, understand and get along with others, whether friends, family or strangers. Without kindness for others and for yourself, it’s impossible to be truly wise.”

## THE FEMALE EDGE

How do people nurture and increase their ability to be compassionate? There is no single answer, said Jeste.

Some aspects of compassion are innate. For example, mirror neurons in our brains allow us to infer emotions and feelings in others, such as leading us to flinch when we see someone bump their head or to snuffle during the death scene in a tearjerker movie. Some aspects of compassion are based on gender and genetics. Females are more empathic than males,

likely due to social conditioning and neurobiology, since women have more oxytocin and more active mirror neuron than men.

No one is stuck with a finite amount of compassion. Individuals can learn to be more compassionate and thus wiser. Researchers have identified many ways to do this: meditation, keeping a gratitude journal of things that bring you satisfaction and joy, even reading. Studies show that people who read novels with a great diversity of characters and plots develop a more expansive and embracing sense of the world.

And acts of compassion beget more compassion. Something that feels good is something we tend to want to do more often.

## OLDER, SOMETIMES BETTER

While getting older is no guarantee of getting wiser, an older brain is in some ways better primed to become wiser, faster. In terms of physiology, younger brains work faster but not necessarily smarter. Young thinking can be a bit sloppy.

Neural reaction times slow with age. It often takes older people longer to learn

new information, but life provides workarounds. Experience helps older people more effectively identify patterns, discern relationships and solve problems because these tasks aren’t entirely new. Mature brains also compensate, shifting duties to different neural circuits less affected by the aging process.

“There is evidence that older but active brains are better primed to increase the principles of wisdom because neural activity shifts from the back of the brain to the front, to regions more associated with higher-order thinking,” said Jeste.

A better understanding of how wisdom works and how to grow the trait in people and cultures offers profound benefits, such as reducing rising rates of suicide, opioid abuse and even the epidemic of loneliness, he said.

Today many people feel that the world has gone mad and that hope is slipping away, Jeste noted. He believes wisdom is crucial in times like these. “Wisdom is the antidote,” he said. “It provides the knowledge, resilience and ability to do better, to be better and, ultimately, make the world a better place.”