“We’re all just walking each other home.”
– Ram Dass

KINDNESS HAPPENS HERE

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INSIDE, PAGE 2
Behind every nonprofit is a personal story. In our new column, founders share moments that sparked their work.

At *Kindness Happens Here*, we do not charge a subscription fee, lock our stories behind a paywall or clutter our newspaper with ads. Sign up here so you never miss an issue.

COMING IN MARCH
Two brothers, two nonprofits — and a shared belief that you’re never too young to make a difference.

Banner with Richard Louv in 1957, in Raytown, Mo.

GUEST ESSAY

The Kindness of Dogs

By Richard Louv

Perhaps you had a dog like Banner long ago, or have one now.

I was 2 when the collie puppy arrived and 12 when he died, and in between, he was my best friend and teacher. He saw me as I wanted to be seen, and he expected me to live up to what he saw. By example, he taught me about kindness.

I remember him with all my senses. I recall the look in his eyes as I held out the last half-inch of a sugar cone, still with ice cream inside, and how he would take it gently into his mouth. I remember the scar on his nose from a dog fight and how it felt as I rubbed my fingers over the fur around it.

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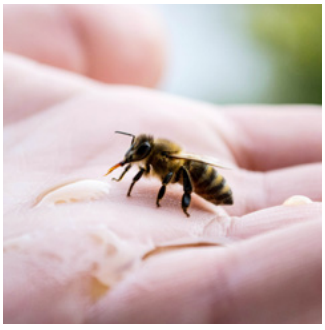
BEE KIND

AN APPRECIATION OF INSECTS

ERIK FRANK / UNIVERSITY OF WÜRZBURG

A Matabele ant tends to the wound of a fellow ant whose legs were bitten off in a fight with termites.



FABIAN KLEISER / UNSPLASH

Honey bees and humans have enjoyed a very long and fruitful relationship. Depictions of beekeeping in art date to 10,000 years ago.

BY SCOTT LAFEE, STAFF WRITER

If you look (maybe squint), there is kindness all around, perhaps even underfoot.

In the grand history of acts of kindness, compassion and empathy, insects get short shrift outside of children’s books like J.J. French’s “Bugs Like Us,” in which misunderstood friends Buzz the fly and Zipp the mosquito come to the aid of a young caterpillar.

Or E.B. White’s 1952 classic “Charlotte’s Web,” featuring a wise and loyal barn spider.

Technically, of course, Charlotte is an

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Your Turn

Your Voice. Your Story. Our Community.

WHY I STARTED A NONPROFIT

Turning Determination into a Backcountry Lifeline

We are proud to introduce a new Your Turn column written by individuals who have taken a leap of faith and started a nonprofit organization — often with little more than conviction and deep love for their communities.

These first-person stories come from founders who saw a need and built something that didn't exist before.

If you have started a nonprofit and would like to share your story, we'd love to hear from you. Contact us at info@kindnesshappenshere.org.

By Hilary Ward
Executive Director
Backcountry Communities Thriving

COURTESY HILARY WARD

Hilary Ward, executive director of Backcountry Communities Thriving (third from right), received the District 32 Nonprofit of the Year award last year from State Senator Kelly Seyarto, far right.

When I was asked to write about why I started a nonprofit organization, the memories came rushing back. Some were joyful and others, not so much. Before this chapter of my life, I spent my career as a school psychologist. I retired in July 2018, burned out, depleted and longing for a quieter life. I felt the pull to move to a rural community for a slower pace and quieter lifestyle. It sure didn't turn out that way and for that, I'm grateful.

My husband and I purchased a home in Julian, an unincorporated, remote mountain community in northeast San Diego County, 60 miles from the city of San Diego. Almost immediately after retiring, I accepted the position of executive director of a nonprofit that supported the local K–8 school district.

Within two years, it became clear that the needs of this community extended far beyond the classroom. Families, seniors and individuals living in the backcountry lacked access to basic services that most people take for granted.

We began expanding our services to support the entire community in early 2020. In hindsight, this was a blessing. When the pandemic hit and schools shut down in March 2020, those services became a lifeline. Our work mattered more than ever. But when the pandemic eased and schools reopened, the board of directors wanted to return to a narrow focus on the school district alone.

My colleague Kim Simas and I couldn't do that. We had built trust with the most underserved residents in our community; abandoning them was not an option. With conviction and a lot of faith, we left that organization to create Backcountry Communities Thriving (BCT). I will always be deeply grateful to Kim for standing beside me, sharing my passion and helping amplify the voices of those too often unheard. Without Kim, there would not be a BCT.

BCT's mission was clear from the start: to ensure the well-being of every child, family and individual in Julian and the surrounding rural backcountry through advocacy, service and support to foster a thriving community.

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Your Voice. Your Story.
Our Community.

Your Turn

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What we didn't have was money, an office or any formal training in how to start a nonprofit. What we did have was determination. I researched relentlessly, wrote the bylaws, completed the filings and navigated the maze of paperwork. On Sept. 10, 2021, we received a letter from the IRS granting us 501(c)(3) status. It felt like a victory, but the work was only beginning.

We grew from humble beginnings, working from our homes and holding meetings at the local coffee shop, then moving into a small office and eventually into a vibrant storefront. Today, BCT operates a thrift shop and a free food pantry, provides space for local artisans to sell their work, puts out a free bimonthly community publication and serves as a fierce advocate for those living in the backcountry. Advocacy has always been central to our mission and it has become more urgent than ever.

None of this has come easily. Funding is an ongoing challenge, as rural nonprofits compete with large organizations that have professional grant-writing teams and expansive donor bases. Too often, our community is overlooked in county-level decisions simply because of its size and location. Bringing services to Julian can feel nearly impossible. I've lost count of how many times officials from various agencies have said, "We serve San Diego County." To which we reply, "We *are* in San Diego County," only to hear, "You're just too far away."

But distance has never deterred us. Instead, it fuels our advocacy. We take those barriers directly to our Board of Supervisors and county agencies and push for systemic change because rural communities deserve equity, not excuses.

As I now look toward a second retirement, my hope is that another passionate individual or group will step forward to carry BCT into the future.

CONNECT WITH BACKCOUNTRY COMMUNITIES

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We have built a strong and responsive network of support for our community. Backcountry Communities Thriving was born out of necessity, sustained by perseverance and guided by the belief that where you live should never determine whether you can access help, dignity or hope.

A Volunteer Opportunity Just for You

Girls Rising

Girls Rising pairs girls ages 8–17 with caring mentors who help them navigate social and economic challenges, build confidence and imagine bigger futures for themselves. Serving girls from historically underserved communities across San Diego County, the program offers consistent encouragement, strong role models and steady support when it matters most.

A companion program for young women ages 18–24 focuses on personal growth and professional development — helping participants step into adulthood with skills, confidence and a sense of possibility.

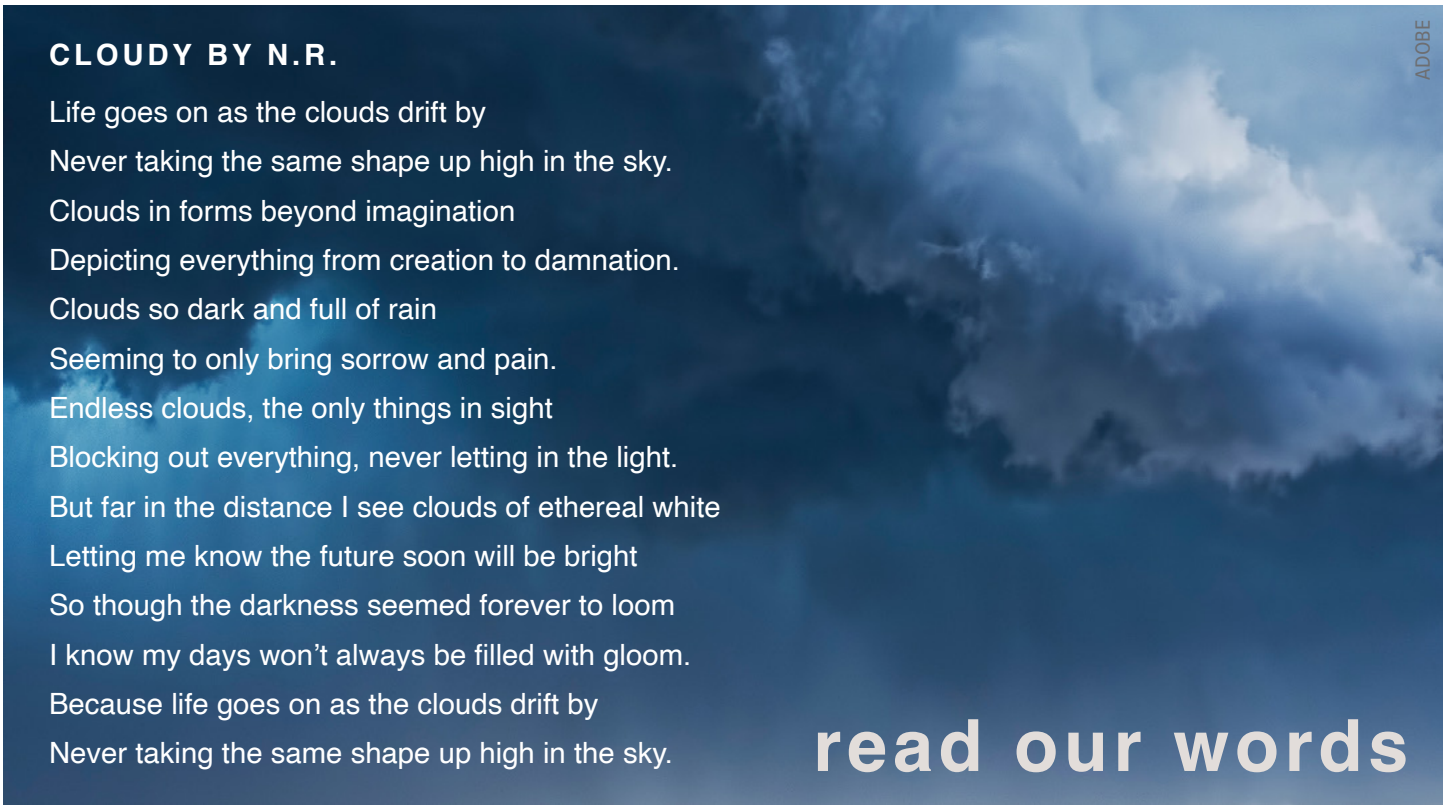
Want more details about the programs or how to become a mentor? Visit the group's website or call (858) 722-0710.

Boys to Men Mentoring Network

Boys to Men creates a rare and powerful space where teenage boys sit in a circle with trusted adult mentors and speak honestly about what they're facing — at school, at home and within themselves. The men listen, share their own hard-won lessons and talk openly about the mistakes they once made, offering guidance rooted in experience rather than judgment. The organization works with 38 school partners throughout San Diego County.

The commitment is simple but meaningful: one hour a week for one school year. The impact can last a lifetime. Visit their website or call (619) 469-9599 to learn how to get involved.

Does your organization provide volunteer opportunities you would like to see featured here?
Write us at info@kindnesshappenshere.org



An example of poetry from one of the participants in Poetic Justice's writing program. To promote healing and connection, Poetic Justice pairs volunteers and female inmates to share the experience of personal writing.

THE GIFT OF VOLUNTEERING

Words That Heal from the Inside

By Gail White

Poetic Justice is an organization that gives women in prison a voice and a way to heal from within through poetry. The program, which pairs volunteers with female inmates, began in Oklahoma in 2014 and is now also active in California, Oregon and Tijuana, Mexico. I have volunteered with Poetic Justice for four years, and I enjoy the one-on-one contact as well as the process of doing my own writing and exploration.

Volunteers can participate in person or remotely through the online exchange of writings. The online program suits me well. Of the four partners I've had, two have already been paroled. I am currently writing with two others who are in different Central California prisons. I have been partners with them for about two years.

Poetic Justice organizes two or three

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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 benefitted 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

Your Voice. Your Story.
Our Community.

Your Turn

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writing cycles per year with an anthology of writings published yearly. Partners begin each writing session in the same way, with an exercise for relaxation and centering. Poetic Justice provides the topic and some poetry examples, then a prompt. Some recent ones have been: "What my name means," "What meets the eye" and "Someone who changed me." Poems are the usual expression, but the format can be a short story, a drawing or some other creative form.

Volunteers and partners exchange writings through a website that the prison monitors. Rarely have we been censored, but it is a possibility.

Between the prompts, my partners and I often write briefly to each other. That is how I learned that one of my partners suffered a medical problem and another was not allowed to take a college course.

I like knowing what is happening in their lives and providing acknowledgment, understanding and support. I know my interest bolsters them. They know I care. I also feel seen and valued. Their lives and histories are so different from mine, yet there are so many experiences we share as women.

Last spring, we had fun learning about eight women poets by studying their style and themes. I wrote a somewhat political poem inspired by Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise." I chose my words carefully because I was a little concerned about getting past the censors.

My partners received my message enthusiastically and totally got the meaning and the echoes of Maya's style. I felt so supported and understood. I also know that I've given the same support to each of them.

I have never met my partners in person, yet I feel I know them well. Poetic Justice had a wonderful exhibit, "Voices on the Inside," in 2024 at the San Diego Central Library that featured photographs of some of our women and their writings. Lisa Loftus, the photographer, captured so much of the women's essence as well as the power of their self-expression. What a moving experience!

Poem by poem, we build a trusting relationship and get to know each other deeply. A bond is formed in our little world. Past and present are shared over time, challenges met, confidence builds, hope often emerges. The connection is a beautiful experience and one that I cherish.

Gail White is a psychologist in private practice in La Mesa. She lives in San Diego with her husband, granddaughter and dog, and enjoys spending time with family and friends, encaustic painting, speaking Spanish, going to the theater and reading.

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SNAPSHOT

Volunteers Help Restore Fragile Habitats

Veronica Cuadras, a conservation technician with Earth Discovery Institute, kneels beside Sage, a young volunteer learning the rhythms of restoration, as her mother, Beth Amann, is busy planting behind her. Volunteers like Beth and Sage planted 2,500 native plants last year at El Monte Ecological Reserve during "planting parties" hosted by EDI.

El Monte, a 142-acre reserve in Lakeside, is a fragile cactus shrub habitat that is home to a rare coastal cactus wren population.

EDI provides technical support and volunteers to land management agencies and private land conservancies to restore native habitat in the county.

COURTESY EARTH DISCOVERY INSTITUTE

earthdiscovery.org // IG @ediexplorers // FB @EarthDiscoveryInstitute

Your Turn

Your Voice. Your Story. Our Community.

CITIZEN SCIENCE

How Using Your Smartphone Can Help Science See the World More Clearly

By Leigh Fenly
Staff Writer


ADOBE

Not long ago, gathering scientific data meant clipboards, field stations and trained experts working in limited places at limited times. Today, some of the most valuable environmental data on the planet is being collected by everyday people with smartphones in their pockets.

Citizen science apps are quickly transforming how we understand the natural world. With a photo, a sound recording or a few taps on a screen, amateur naturalists are helping scientists track biodiversity, migration patterns, weather events and habitat changes on a scale that was once unimaginable. These millions of observations now inform academic research and, increasingly, real-world decisions about conservation and development.

At their core, citizen science apps are mobile tools that invite the public into the scientific process. Designed to be user-friendly, they require no formal training. Instead, they guide users step by step: what to observe, how to record it and where to submit the data. Once uploaded, observations are stored in vast databases, where researchers analyze patterns over time and across regions.

The advantages are profound. Scientists gain access to data from far more locations than they could ever visit themselves. Projects that once took years can sometimes gather information in months. And because participation is open to everyone, these apps deepen public engagement with science — not as something distant or abstract, but as a shared responsibility.

Among the most widely used platforms is **iNaturalist**, which allows users to photograph plants and animals and upload observations for identification. Its built-in artificial intelligence offers suggestions, while a global community of experts helps confirm species. The resulting data is used to monitor biodiversity, track invasive species and document changes in ecosystems worldwide.

Birders, from beginners to experts, rely on **eBird**, a platform that turns simple bird sightings into one of the most comprehensive bird population datasets ever created. Scientists use eBird data to study migration routes, population declines and the effects of climate change on bird behavior.

For those drawn to a wider range of projects, **Zooniverse** offers something different. Users can help classify galaxies, identify wildlife in camera-trap images or analyze historical records — all from their phones or computers. The app is proof that discovery doesn't always require going outdoors; sometimes it starts with curiosity.

Other apps focus on specific aspects of the natural world. **GLOBE Observer** invites participants to record clouds, trees and land cover, contributing to long-term climate and environmental studies.

There are also more specialized tools such as **mPing** that let users report local weather events.

As biodiversity declines and climate change accelerates, these shared digital records of life may become much more important. Citizen science apps don't just collect data — they build bridges between science and the public, reminding us that careful observation is a form of care. And sometimes, the simple act of noticing becomes a way to protect what we love.

YOUR TURN

Have You Tried a Citizen Science App?

Maybe you've logged a bird sighting, photographed a wildflower or helped map the night sky. Tell us which apps you use and what you've discovered along the way. Write us at info@kindnesshappenshere.org

Your Voice. Your Story.
Our Community.

Your Turn

KINDNESS, ACCORDING TO YOU

Acts of Love, Shared by You

Kindness Happens Here isn't just about the stories we tell, but the ones you share. Each month, we pose a question to our community, inviting reflections on the small, meaningful acts of compassion that shape our lives. Together, your stories show how deeply kindness connects us.

JANUARY'S QUESTION

How do you show kindness to those you love?

We are so pleased to present your answers.

• • •

CHRISTMAS LOVE LETTERS

Following the example of another family, we gave writing Christmas love letters a try when our two sons were young. All four of us wrote down 10 things we loved about each family member in cards that the recipients read aloud first thing Christmas morning.

We were all very moved and emotional after the readings and suddenly the wrapped presents under the tree seemed unnecessary.

We've continued through the years and now the cards have become precious heirlooms.

Now I write a "love letter" when I want to show someone how much I care about them. Sometimes I will frame the list for a wonderful gift.

*— **Kathy Louv, Julian***

• • •

A SONG OF LOVE

It's the little things in life that warm your heart.

My son is at college now. When he was a young child, he loved when I sang him his song, making up words as I went, singing about all the things he's good at in life.

This past Christmas he reminded me of the song. Now when I call him I playfully sing his song to him. Feeling like a kid again always makes your heart smile.

*— **Natalie Chappius, 4S Ranch***

• • •

BRINGING FRIENDS AND FAMILY TOGETHER

I show kindness to the people I love by paying attention to who they are and what matters to them. I listen to their stories, remember the small details and try to respond in thoughtful ways. Often that means creating something by hand — sewing a gift or crafting a surprise. My kindness is rooted in intention: showing up, remembering and doing something personal.

I organize family gatherings and reunions because connection is one of the greatest gifts I can give. Whether it's hosting or quietly supporting someone behind the scenes, I want the people I love to feel seen, supported and valued.

It's hard to describe how much showing kindness means to me. It brings me purpose, warmth and a deep sense of connection. I am grateful for my husband of more than 37 years, my children and the large circle of family and friends who make my life rich. I have learned that my life feels fuller and more joyful when I share love in these ways.

*— **Pat Rice, Ocean Beach***

FEBRUARY'S QUESTION

What's something someone once taught you that felt like a true gift?

Please email your answer to info@kindnesshappenshere.org by Feb. 10. We'll pick a sampling of responses to feature here. Together, your words create a shared space where kindness is noticed, valued and passed along.

Cover Story: Bee Kind

Continued from Page 1

arachnid, not an insect, but the point remains: To our minds, examples of bug "kindness" can probably be counted on six to eight appendages.

We feel more kindly toward some nonhuman animals (see Kindness Isn't Just Human, Page 9), but we tend to dismiss insects categorically. Sometimes bugs are considered useful (think bees); more often they are deemed annoying (think flies, mosquitoes and sometimes bees). Mostly, we don't much think about insects at all, even as we step on them.

Yet if you squint again, you will see examples of insect behavior that look like kindness, even though scientists take issue with the word.

Ants can appear especially selfless, practicing social distancing when ill and protecting their queen to their death. Florida carpenter ants (*Camponotus floridanus*), for example, will amputate the grievously injured legs of nestmates to stave off infection and save their comrades' lives.

Another ant species, *Megaponera analis*, applies secreted antimicrobial compounds and proteins to wounded ants, reducing mortality by 90 percent.

Developing *Lasius neglectus* ants in pupae that are ill with a deadly fungus will emit a chemical signal instructing worker ants to kill them, sparing the larger colony.

COURTESY HOLWAY LAB

David Holway, a professor of biology at UC San Diego, focuses on how invasions of foreign insect species into new environments affects native species, particularly pollinator populations, such as honey bees.

Virtually all ants are eusocial, as are termites and many species of bees and wasps. But overall, eusociality — meaning the highest level of social organization — is uncommon in insects. Only 2 percent of species have the four defining traits:

• All members live and work together in a shared nest, colony or hive.

• Lifespans are long enough to overlap, ensuring multigenerational "homes."

• Adults cooperatively help raise young, even if not their own.

• Only a few individuals, such as a queen, reproduce while others perform tasks such as foraging, defense and brood care.

Many of the behaviors eusocial insects display have provoked intriguing and sometimes controversial questions about the possibility that they have personality, intelligence and consciousness. Less controversial is how scientists think about apparent acts of insect kindness.

"Kindness as an idea doesn't really apply to insects," said David Holway, a professor of biology at the University of California San Diego.

Instead, the pertinent concept is altruism. When ants sacrifice their fitness to help the queen raise more siblings, the behavior is driven not by compassion but rather by an evolutionary greater good.

"It's about protecting individuals so that they can make more individuals," explained Holway.

GOOD FOR THE GROUP

For a long time, scientists struggled to explain altruism in insects.

Charles Darwin called it "one special difficulty" that caused him to occasionally doubt his theory of evolution. Selfless acts among social insects would seem to violate the concept of natural selection and survival of the fittest. It's generally understood that fittest means the individual with the greatest chance of reproductive success.

In 1964, evolutionary biologist William D. Hamilton proposed the rule of kin selection, which suggests that helping others at a cost to oneself can benefit relatives who share your genes.

"Honey bees are a classic example because most workers do not reproduce and instead invest in raising siblings," said Professor James C. Nieh, also at UC San Diego in the Department

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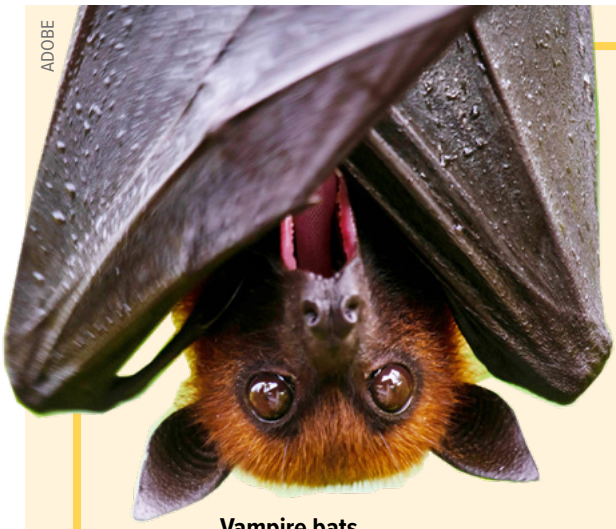
CHRISTOPHER D. PULL / ISTA

When an ant pupa signals its imminent death caused by an incurable infection, workers unpack it from its cocoon and disinfect it.

Cover Story: Bee Kind



ADOBE

Kindness Isn't Just Human

Seeming Nonhuman Acts of Kindness Abound in the Animal World

Vampire bats share blood meals with hungry colony members.

SHARON WALDRON / UNSPLASH

Rats work to free trapped rats.

ADAM LISAN / UNSPLASH

Dolphins support sick or injured pod members, holding them afloat to prevent drowning, escorting them to safety and freeing them from fishing nets.

TOMAS MALIK / PEXELS

Elephants comfort other elephants and stand vigil over dead herd members.

Humpback whales defend smaller whales, seals and fish from predatory killer whales.

ADOBE

Cover Story: Bee Kind

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COURTESY NIEH LAB

UC San Diego Professor James Nieh

of Ecology, Behavior and Evolution. Nieh studies insect behavior and communications, focusing on bees.

"Some of my favorite bee examples are the everyday ones — nurses feeding larvae, workers sharing food and groups regulating brood temperature," he explained. "Then there is colony health. Honey bees and other social insects show what is often called social immunity — grooming and removal that reduce infection risk for everyone."

Health-compromised workers sometimes leave the hive, he noted, which can look like self-sacrifice, but can also be understood as a benefit to the colony.

SMART BUGS

Beyond altruism, insects can show surprising forms of "intelligence," from an ability to understand abstract symbols to learning and solving complex problems. The three groups of insects most often considered the smartest are bees, ants and cockroaches.

"The view that bees are cleverly designed reflex machines has been entirely overturned in the last decades," contends Lars Chittka, a German zoologist and author of the 2023 book "The Mind of the Bee." "We now know that bees have a symbolic language, pay attention, use tools and can learn by observation."

Bees' ability to count has been shown in multiple experiments in which the insects learned that they would receive a sugar reward if they chose the card with the fewest symbols on it. Other studies have found bees can learn simple addition and subtraction by associating colors (blue for add, yellow for subtract) with changing quantities. They also seem to have a distinct method of counting, ordering numbers in increasing size from left to right.

Some researchers also argue that insects display the beginnings of consciousness.

ADOBE

Young worker honey bees (4-12 days old) start their careers as nurses, responsible for rearing the next generation by feeding larvae royal jelly, pollen and nectar. A single larva can be visited and inspected by nurse bees more than 1,300 times per day.

"There is strong reason to think that insects and other invertebrates are conscious," write Colin Klein and Andrew Barren, philosophy professors at Macquarie University in Australia. "Their experience of the world is not as rich or as detailed as our experience — our big neocortex adds something to life. But it still feels like something to be a bee."

Nieh notes that bumblebees (*Bombus terrestris*) will avoid painful heat if an alternative food source is available but will endure the heat when the sugar reward is especially enticing. The behavior suggests bumblebees feel something akin to pain and can also decide if the reward is worth the discomfort. Bumblebees also display emotional connections with other bumblebees, share good moods and engage in playful behaviors.

Some studies also suggest that insects have individual personalities, even when they are genetic clones. In 2015, for example, scientists attached tiny radio frequency identification chips to the thoraxes of 304 American cockroaches (*Periplaneta americana*).

Then the researchers split the roaches into groups and put them in brightly lit boxes containing disks that offered darker shelter. Shy cockroaches immediately ran for cover, but bolder individuals spent more time in the bright light, exploring.

Shy and bold cockroaches repeated their behaviors in subsequent experiments, though eventually all would gather together under shelter because cockroaches are quite gregarious and experience a sort of "loneliness" when left too long to their own devices and crevices.

Insects might also feel something akin to fear. Fruit flies will freeze, scurry away and avoid threats such as shadows, and they will remember the threat after it has passed. The more often the threat occurs, the more strongly the fruit flies react. Scientists call the fruit flies' behavior an emotion primitive.

There are an estimated 10 quintillion insects in the world (that's 10 followed by 18 zeros), or about 1.2 billion insects for every person on Earth. That's not counting spiders and other buggy invertebrates.

Somewhere between 900,000 and 1 million insect species have been identified, but perhaps two to 10 million more species remain undiscovered.

Most of us will run into a limited number of insects over our lifetimes. When we do, we tend to make their lifetimes shorter.

Maybe next time, don't. Sparing them is an act of kindness they might appreciate and remember.

Cover Story: The Kindness of Dogs

Continued from Page 1

I recall his collar of long fur, my hands deep in it. I remember lying half-asleep, my head on his side, nestled in the blanket of his fur, curling my fingers in its thickness, listening to him breathe and drifting into a dream.

I also remember Banner as a peacemaker. He intervened during spankings, barking frantically, jumping up and down between the spanker and the spankee, wearing his odd, ambivalent grin. He was so insistent that my mother often stopped in mid-swat and gave up, laughing in spite of herself.

Those were the days when fences were rare and dogs ran free. They chased cars and fought. Banner fought, too, but never with small dogs. Once I watched him shoot up the street as the neighborhood's meanest dog leaped toward a neighbor who was holding her little dog in her arms. Banner caught the big dog in midair. Later, the neighbor came to our door to thank my mother for Banner.

He would pull my brother by the diaper from the street. He would sit on us when we threw rocks. Sometimes, when we were away from the house and up to no good, he would go home, and my mother would know something was up. But he would always come back.

I spent much of my boyhood in the woods with Banner. My parents didn't always know where I was, but Banner always did.

BECOMING DOGS

When I was 8, I fell through the ice of a creek. In water up to my waist, I tried to climb the steep and snowy bank but kept slipping back. Banner left. But then he came back. The memory is vivid: Banner at one end of a fallen branch, tugging, as I pulled myself up the branch until I reached the top.

I tell you this with some embarrassment, knowing the tricks of memory, that the brain tries to embellish memories until they become the story we want to tell.

A few years ago, an animal behaviorist took issue with my story. Dogs usually fight the largest dog available, he explained. Banner was only playing tug-of-war with the branch. He was doing what dogs do. "Your interpretation was the lesson," he added. "Perhaps you unconsciously aggrandized yourself by seeing his behavior as heroic. But who taught him to tug on the stick — an act that may have unintentionally saved your life? Probably you taught him that."

COURTESY RICHARD LOUV

Banner, the rescuer and peacemaker

Such rationality is appealing, but so is the unknowable. Some Buddhists contend that a teacher or priest who fails to live a good life can be demoted in the next life to a dog, still with the urge to teach.

How did wolves become dogs? In the standard story, wolves scavenged carcasses left behind by human hunters. Later, as humans ate around the campfire, they tossed food scraps and bones into the darkness. Wolves came closer and entered the firelight; eventually the two species became working partners.

Over the generations, wolves changed. Traits of domestication, such as relative gentleness and direct eye contact, emerged. Spots and jeweled collars came later.

But here's another theory. In 2003, Wolfgang M. Schleidt, retired director of the Konrad Lorenz Institute of Ethology in Vienna, and his coauthor, Michael D. Shalter, argued that human nature was shaped, in part, by early canines.

As our ancestors followed the herds, they learned from wolves' teamwork, their well-coordinated hunting drives, how they helped each other carry items too heavy for any one individual, how they provided not only for their own young but also for other pack members, how they shared babysitting, and more. Schleidt and Shalter argued that early contacts between wolves and humans led to changes in both species as they coevolved.

In other words, wolves helped domesticate us.

Today, dogs surely continue to influence our ethics, our ability to cooperate, our acts of kindness and even our ability to love.

We are more than walking genetic code; we are biological poems, and so are the creatures around us. We do not create the code or language, but we do make meaning out of it. We write the first lines of that poem as children. Our companion animals humanize us. They can offer unconditional love and show us how to give it. They give us the gift of shared imperfections, the seed of sympathy and humor. They join our pack. Or we join theirs. They and we co-become. We are not alone.

THE CARE HE GAVE

One dark morning, I awakened to the sound of my mother crying. I was sure that something had happened to my father. I ran down the stairs and out to the porch to find Banner, carried from the road by my father, lying cold and stiff on a bench. I cried, but the crying was fake — I was relieved that my father still lived.

For a long time, I felt guilty about that secret fakery. In that final lesson, Banner taught me about the confusion and untidiness of death.

All these years later, Banner remains within me because of the care he gave us, the deeds he did and what I imagined him to be. Whenever I think of Banner, I experience a sensory flood, just as I do when I think of my parents, now gone.

He lives in me, his black-and-gold fur moving in waves of energy along his back and sides as he shoots above the snow, cutting through the bitter wind, an arrow of joy.

Richard Louv is the author of 11 books, including "Last Child in the Woods" and "Our Wild Calling," from which this essay is adapted. His new book, "Noticing: Intimate Encounters in the Natural World," will be published by Algonquin Books in March. He and his wife, Kathy, live in Julian, Calif.

Contributors

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

Meet the Team

FOUNDER & EDITOR

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.

STAFF WRITERS

ROBERT KRIER wrote and edited for *The San Diego Union-Tribune* for 32 years. He covered local weather for 20 years and also reported on climate-change issues. He retired in 2020. He now spends much of his time outdoors, marveling at weather, trees, wildlife and nature.

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.

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.

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).

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.

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Meet the Team

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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.

DESIGNER

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 the nonprofit Educreate to inspire and empower young creators through art and technology.

ILLUSTRATOR

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.

PHOTOGRAPHER

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.