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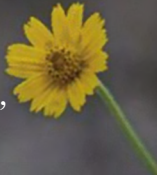
Ten years ago, while working as a Vice-Principal in Coquitlam,

I was approached by student leaders who wanted to extend their reach beyond our school and make a positive difference in the community. Together, we decided to give back by helping marginalized citizens living on the streets in Canada's poorest neighbourhood, Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. We began by collecting food and clothing to distribute. Days before our scheduled trip, the *Vancouver Province* ran an article outlining the many service agencies that provide basic necessities, especially during the winter season. I decided to cancel our trip.

The disappointment our students felt led to a reflective conversation about our purpose, and why we wanted to volunteer. We realized we were searching for that good feeling that comes from giving to others. We wondered if those living on the streets had the opportunity to give, especially if they were relying primarily on handouts for survival. The idea of *Project HELLO* (Helping Everyone Locate Loved Ones) was born. In simple terms, we decided to give something that others could give away. As an avid scrapbooker at the time, I had plenty of extra cardstock and art supplies, so I invited students to make handmade Christmas cards with the idea that we would distribute them along Hastings Street, inviting people to write to friends within the Downtown Eastside community, or possibly beyond. We held on to the hope that at least one person might ask us to help send messages of love to family they had lost touch with. Our fieldtrip took place on November 30, 2009, and was supposed to last for four hours. I had no idea at the

time that this simple day trip would become a labour of love that would profoundly impact my life and the lives of my students.

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We quickly realized the streets were filled with untold stories, and people who craved human connection. While the homeless community is often provided with food or makeshift shelter, their emotional needs are often left unmet. We quickly discovered that the people we were meeting were no different than us. They welcomed the opportunity to connect and asked for our assistance sending messages of love to their brothers, sisters, children, parents or long-lost friends. Often, these

messages brought up memories from the past. Many people on the streets have experienced significant trauma. We quickly realized the Downtown Eastside is a very misunderstood neighbourhood and that the drug use in the neighbourhood is often just a band-aid to mask the pain of broken souls. On our very first trip, dozens of individuals reached out and asked if we could attempt to mail cards to their family members. With guarded optimism, we agreed to do what we could to reconnect families. What began as a one-day fieldtrip spiralled into a decade-long student initiative helping hundreds of Vancouver's homeless community to reconnect with family through greeting cards, phone calls and face-to-face reunions.

In 2013, when I moved to the Maple Ridge school district and continued with *Project HELLO*, I realized we needed to go deeper. The five-minute conversations we were



having were only tapping the surface of untold stories. We renamed our project *Beyond HELLO* and made the personal commitment to take a homeless person to lunch each month so that we could learn and share their stories. What started out as a simple act of giving has become the most powerful lesson of my life. The people on the streets have taught my students and me about courage, strength, resilience and hope. There is a wisdom that comes to those who have lost it all. The stories from the streets have taught me about compassion and led me into an unexpected journey of forgiveness, seeing my absent father through a different light, and understanding that he too, had an untold story. I began to blog about our experiences in an effort to spread compassion within our community www.beyondhello.org.

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This year, in an effort to shift the perception of homelessness and teach compassion, I published a

book *Beyond Hello: Rekindling the Human Spirit One Conversation at a Time*. Our book is available at Amazon and Indigo and would be suitable for a Leadership or Social Justice Class. Each book sold pays for a meal for someone living on the streets in British Columbia.

As we head back to school in September, I encourage you all to seek out those who may otherwise be invisible. Every school and every community has people who are waiting to be seen, and whose stories deserve to be heard. In many ways, the COVID-19 pandemic has given us a better understanding of our own students' circumstances, as we have reached out to support our most vulnerable learners and families. COVID-19 has impacted families in different ways as British Columbians have managed financial struggles, social isolation, health risks and a new education model.

As we return to school, there is no greater time to serve as awakened leaders, truly seeing one another and appreciating that everyone has a story worth hearing. May we all go *Beyond Hello* and connect with compassion.

Have a great start up!

