

Unity Award Recipients

- 2020 -

The “Together Against Bullying” Award

Awarded for taking action to prevent and change an attitude or behavior that physically or emotionally hurts, harms, or humiliates someone.



Rylee Ruegger

After experiencing bullying, Rylee Ruegger started her own campaign, The Be Nice Program. She brings The Be Nice Program to schools and community organizations, sharing her story and advocating for bullying awareness and empathy. She uses the tools that helped her through her own struggles with bullying: the resources she found on PACER’s National Bullying Prevention Center website. She also uses the Remind app to send out inspirational messages once a week. In these messages, she offers positive quotes and shares her mission, #LetsBeNice.

Using screen-printing equipment in her classroom, Rylee designed and created Unity Day shirts that she sold to raise money for PACER. Rylee’s latest endeavor is “branding” her program. She designed a logo for The Be Nice Program and has launched merchandise including t-shirts, pop-sockets, and stickers that she uses not only to raise awareness, but also to raise funds for her next big goal: the #LetsBeNice Bus. She wants to take the bus to schools to engage students in bullying awareness activities, as well as invite them to sign the bus.

Rylee’s goal is to make sure every child knows that they can help prevent bullying. When she created The Be Nice Program over three years ago, Rylee thought very little of herself. Since that time, she has learned that she IS good enough to advocate for herself and for other students who have experienced bullying. She shows students that everyone has a story and that you can use that story to go out and change the world.

The “United for Kindness” Award

Awarded for demonstrating outstanding act(s) of being helpful to others.



Marley Middle School Kindness Club

This is the inaugural year of the Marley Kindness Club and they started making an impact immediately. The club started with a little over 20 students in grade 6 – 8 and have grown to 95 members and counting. They started the year by designing a monthly Kindness tracker with different “look fors” (e.g., to look for compliments, look for kindness, look for inclusion, etc.). Teachers stamp the card for every time they see a student complete a kind act. Once the student fills the card, they turn it into the Kindness Club members at the table outside the cafeteria for a caught being kind sticker and an entry into the monthly raffle.

These students are our new student ambassadors and they shadow new students on their first day of school. They also made 1000 orange friendship bracelets to give out to every student and staff member on Unity Day. They joined the Trex Recycling Program and have ran a Be Kind to your environment campaign all year by collecting plastic film to be recycled. They also participated in the Red Ribbon Week initiative with an anti-drug Be Kind to your body campaign. They also worked together to apply for Kids Kindness Grants and earned \$600 to create duffel bags for kids going into foster care, hospital boxes (The Jared Box Project), and a week-long teacher appreciation plan. They also made blankets for Project Linus, assisted with various raffles, and they are currently making autism awareness bracelets to give out to everyone in April and researching trivia questions to do a fact/question about autism for each day of the week.

Their energy and enthusiasm for all things kind is infectious. One student claimed he is "addicted to kindness." We made matching "Addicted to Kindness" shirts for this student and an assistant principal that they wore during Kindness Spirit week for twin day. And, last but not least, they led the charge in inspiring their peers to be the first school to reach 1000 acts of kindness in our countywide middle school Kindness Cup challenge and won! These kids are amazing!!

The "United for Acceptance" Award

Awarded for looking beyond the differences of others and celebrating what makes each person unique.



Grace Coleman

I would like to nominate Grace Coleman. Five years ago, while cheering on a competitive team, Grace couldn't help but think how nice it would be for her city, Savannah, to have a special needs team for differently-abled athletes. She and her sister went to her team's owner, told them their plan, and began to solicit children from around the community. They eventually created a team for children with Down syndrome, autism spectrum disorder, cerebral palsy, and other physical and mental disabilities. There was no disability that Grace (and her fellow coaches recruited to help) excluded. More than 25 athletes have gone through the program so far. Grace and her coaching team organize cheer camps in the summer, coach them every week, and help them through the 4-5 competitions that the team competes in every year. She puts around 40-50 hours a year into this program she loves.

It's wonderful for all of us (parents and friends) to watch. I'm not sure who is more excited at the competitions, these athletes or their parents. There are always lots of joyful and grateful tears and the team always gets a standing ovation from the audience. It's amazing what Grace's dream has become and what an impact it has had on the athletes and on the community. To share a note from Meredith Schuster, a parent of one of the athletes, to the coaches: "So thankful for these beautiful and talented, loving friends. Coach Grace, Coach Mya, and Clair's (cheer) buddy made sure that Clair had a successful experience and got to indulge in all of the competition fun with peer (not mom) support. My heart runneth other! Thank you to the girls and to their loving parents who have raised them to be such amazing and compassionate leaders who make this experience possible. It's a great day to be a Shark!"

The “United for Inclusion” Award

Awarded for outstanding acts to help others feel like they belong and know that they aren’t alone.



Unity, Inc from the Roosevelt High School Choir Department

The Roosevelt High School Choir Department in Sioux Falls, SD is home to 12 choirs with a total of 650 student participants. The pride of the 2019-20 season has been the inauguration of the first ever all-abilities show choir, Unity, Inc.! When the two directors came together and

created the first inclusive show choir, Unity, Inc., they not only gave Roosevelt students with special needs a place to sing, dance, socialize, and compete like anyone else in the choir department, they also gave their families the opportunity to experience having a child in the activity and being a proud parent/fan like all the other parents!

In addition, the students who have volunteered to sing and dance in the choir as “buddies” are the heartbeat of the group’s success! These students enthusiastically and authentically share their talents, their hearts, their friendship, and their belief that an inclusive world is possible. In sharing Unity, Inc. with the world and promoting inclusion in these ways, the students inspire others. The department has been contacted by multiple directors in the region asking advice on how to start similar programs in their schools! Unity, Inc. promotes the belief that all students deserve the opportunity to perform, sing, dance, form friendships, and be applauded!

The Faces of Change Award

Awarded to individuals and groups for outstanding acts to make a difference in our community, nominated by PACER’s Youth Advisory Boards in Minnesota and California



Principal Ryan Gibbs

“Principal Gibbs meets every student as they enter the school and he meets the busses every morning. When the weather permits, he also does the "Loring Lightrail" where all the buses and students meet a quarter of a mile from the school and they walk together every Friday morning to talk about their week and make new friends, pushing wheelchairs and holding hands when needed so all students are included. All students are taught to meet their highest expectations individually, whether they receive special education services or are in general education. Principal Gibbs is committed to ensuring that each of his students is given the opportunities they need to achieve their goals.” – Nominated by PACER’s Youth Advisory, Minnesota



Katie Kurpris

“Katie is a thoughtful, caring, and compassionate person in all she does. She goes out of her way to include others at school, making people feel welcome and accepted. Though she has experienced her share of bullying, teasing, and feeling isolated, she is quick to point out that she’s fortunate: being differently abled has its challenges but she is unique and knows she can be helpful and supportive of others because of her unique experiences

Katie’s genuine consideration for others was best highlighted this past November: she decided to perform “20 Random

Acts of Kindness” to celebrate her 20th birthday. Katie didn’t tell anyone at school about this, just smiled anytime people talked about a peer discovering something special: an envelope with soda money taped to the pop machine with a note that read, “Enjoy a soda on me”; an encouraging and/or inspirational note on someone’s desk or on the lunch table; a \$5 bill in a random lunch bag with the note that read, “Treat yourself to something nice at the school store.” Student recipients of these random acts of kindness were so appreciative and excited. Students throughout the building were not only talking about these thoughtful acts, they were also inspired to be more kind to each other. When it was discovered by staff that Katie was our ‘Kindness Elf,’ she told the teachers that she always does something on her birthday to make the world a better place. This, she said, is her “birthday gift to myself.” – Nominated by PACER’s Youth Advisory, Minnesota



Bemidji High School Unified

“Bemidji High School is leading the Unified Movement in Northern Minnesota, advancing inclusion in their school and community through Unified Physical Education courses as well as through unified sports, events, activities, and awareness campaigns. Bemidji High School has been a Unified Champion School through Special Olympics Minnesota since 2018. Before that they were an early adopter of unified sports, and today they participate in five different sports throughout the school year giving students of all abilities an opportunity to compete together on the same team.

This past winter, a team of BHS students participated in the first annual Unified State High School Basketball tournament at Orono High School, taking home 3rd place in the top division. The students spent two days traveling, socializing, and playing basketball together. Pictures of teammates, arms around each other's shoulders and faces grinning wide, speak volumes to the power of the unified movement, and the power of this generation of young people to lead us toward a more just and inclusive society, both on and off the court. While BHS certainly strives for inclusion within their school, they also work hard to include the larger community around them, bringing together students from other schools and members of the community to participate in unified activities, like the Unified Winter Formal and Unified Yard Games. Additionally, through Young Athletes, the BHS Unified PE class hosts elementary students with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities to share in fun activities that build gross motor skills for all.

They host events for older kids, too, through Unified Juniors, an inclusive program to build sport-specific skills. They also regularly invite Special Olympics athletes from the community to visit their Unified PE class as guest speakers and to intern at the school. Additionally, they collaborate with Bemidji State University to engage college students in their programming and build awareness on the power of inclusion. BSU now has its own club to foster inclusion on campus, which was started by a BHS graduate. All of this work has led to a sea change within the school. Inclusive classes and events have given students space to develop meaningful friendships that extend outside the classroom, into the hallways and lunchroom, and beyond the walls of BHS. New ideas for inclusion have sprung up in other departments throughout the school, and BHS continues to expand opportunities for inclusion for their students and their community.” – Nominated by PACER’s Youth Advisory, Minnesota



Jodi Betsinger, Kristine Vankempen and Samantha Schackman

“Jodi Betsinger, Kristine Adams Vankempen, and Samantha Schackman are child life specialists in the Cancer and Blood Disorders program at Children's MN. They use therapeutically developmental and educational activities to help children understand and cope with medical care experiences. Their supportive techniques make complex medical procedures less stressful. The work they do appears magical to those observing. A child’s needle poke can be done during a playful distraction. A young patient not only builds

agency and comfort in doing the procedures, the positive experience also helps reduce parental stress (imagine seeing your child with cancer doing a procedure with playful ease!). Our child life team also cares deeply about the siblings, including them in the experience. A new cancer diagnosis in the family means major changes for everyone. Jodi, Kristy, and Sam’s work in the hospital and clinic is amazing, but the reason I’m nominating these women for this award is that they take their work one step further. They not only help the patient, parents, and siblings, they also teach their classmates how to be inclusive! Jodi, Kristy, and Sam offer to go to schools with children with cancer and bleeding disorders to talk with the child’s classmates. For example, an elementary school aged child with leukemia is worried about how she will be treated when she goes back to class with hair loss and having missed many days of school. With support from Jodi, Kristy, or Sam, the child is able to explain the treatment, explain that cancer isn’t contagious, and answer questions about how friends can be supportive. Our child life team helps the patient share that she feels better when she is treated as her typical self! The classroom visit helps the child feel included and helps classmates learn how to be better friends. The child can then get beyond their diagnosis and back to what matters most: being a kid! In a world with COVID, the school re-entry visit looks different but Jodi, Kristy, and Sam recognize that even with distant learning, patients worry that peers might treat their child differently. Our child life team continues to offer connections to schools and peers, and helps our patients share their story with friends. Now more than ever, feeling included and connected matters. Thanks to these three for making the world more inclusive for families and communities impacted by cancer and blood disorders!” – Nominated by PACER’s Youth Advisory, Minnesota



The Bandana Project at Mounds View High School

“The Bandana Project is a peer-driven mental health awareness and suicide prevention program providing resources for those struggling with mental health issues. They want their peers to know that they are not alone with their mental health issue or crisis and they are available to assist them in getting them the help they need.

Training is provided to students and

they have a visible lime green bandana attached to their backpacks. This indicates that they are a safe individual to approach with mental health-related issues, that they know where resources are, and that they hold a few resource cards with outlets to get help and support in times of crisis, such as School Support, County Children's Crisis Line, NAMI-MN, and National Crisis Lines. At Mounds View High School, The Bandana Project launched a year ago and has had a large positive response from students who want to be part of the solution for those struggling with mental health issues. If someone sees a lime green bandana on the backpack of a stranger, it is a sign of stigma-free, quiet solidarity. They will know that they are not alone in their struggle.” – Nominated by PACER’s Youth Advisory, Minnesota



Erica Ganske

“Erica is an incredible person. Erica takes care of everyone and makes sure no one is ever excluded. Ever since I have known her, she has always been one of the kindest, most loving people I know. The past few years have not been easy for Erica. A few years ago, her dad was diagnosed with a form of leukemia and had to undergo chemotherapy and a bone marrow transplant. Luckily, he came out of it and is in remission, but it was a very scary time. Shortly after this happened, her mom came down with a different form of leukemia. It was an unimaginable thing to

happen to a family—both parents diagnosed with this horrible disease.

Yet through it all, Erica has not only persevered, she has continued to be her kind and loving self. When she could have been wallowing in sadness, she was always checking in on others and asking how they were doing. It has been truly remarkable. Sadly, Erica 's mom passed away this fall after a nearly two-year battle with cancer. Although Erica was heartbroken, she was still putting other people's struggles and feelings before herself. Even when she came back to school she would put others before herself. And that's what kindness is all about, putting others before yourself even when your world is falling apart. I can't imagine a more kind and deserving individual to win this award. Erica is one of the best of the best and I am proud to call her a friend and classmate.” – Nominated by PACER’s Youth Advisory, Minnesota



The Mentors and Protectors at Alliance Burton Tech High School

“MAPs (The Mentors & Protectors) of Alliance Burton Tech HS is the bullying awareness and prevention advisory at our school. These students have worked tirelessly, especially this year, to help their peers know they have a safe space to go when they are being bullied. It’s been amazing to watch this advisory grow in the past four years and become a respected group. They reach out to those in need and try to make sure students are not lonely.

Students are now coming to MAPs to report cyber-

and in-person bullying. MAPS is preparing a Bully Bootcamp for the middle school feeder schools that will begin this spring. With this “bootcamp,” the incoming 9th graders will already know they have a place at our school to help them feel included and safe. MAPs also planned Unity Day back in October 2019 and it was the biggest and most successful one so far with over 50 booths of student groups, community outreach programs, vendors, and musical performances with over 1,000 people in attendance! This group keeps growing stronger each year with the goal to reach out to students in need and make sure they know MAPs has got their back! Their motto is, “Cuz we actually care,” and they really do!” – Nominated by PACER’s Youth Advisory, California



Zachery Ramos

“Zachery has mentored youth through his organization, educating them on the importance of volunteering and how much it matters that everyone does their part to help make their communities cleaner and safer for everyone. He has helped children going through bullying by working with them one-on-one to make sure they know someone cares about their situation, while teaching them to find their own voice. Zachery created the Central Valley Traveling Library to spread his love for literacy and kindness across the state of California, all over the Valley. He has helped get kids out of their shells and active in their communities through the love of books and has given out over 10,000 books since creating it his senior year of high school back in 2017. He has also raised money for numerous charities, disease research, and disaster-aid relief to help families affected by the fires here in California and the hurricane in Texas (even going as far as having aid personally delivered to Texas to make sure it reached the families in need). He has demonstrated acts of kindness that I haven’t seen anyone else in our

county do.” – Nominated by PACER’s Youth Advisory, California



THRIVE Conejo

“This is a group founded to promote inclusive education for students with disabilities in the Conejo Valley Unified School District. The founders of this group are parents of exceptional learners and they work tirelessly—through community events, attending school board meetings, sponsoring events, and more—to get the word out that #AllMeansAll.”

– Nominated by PACER’s Youth Advisory, California