Any Small Act of Kindness

Sara Kimmel's wisdom isn't the kind you acquire overnight, so it's no surprise to find that she's been working with students and educators for 18 years. By speaking up about bullying and advocating anti-bias resources, she has made her library—and her school—a nurturing, inclusive environment for all.

**Why did you become a librarian?**
I wanted to work with all the students in my school. I believe my role has changed very little over the years. I see myself as a conduit to information and an advocate for my patrons.

**How does your school promote diversity?**
Our school has a variety of clubs and organizations for students. Some are traditional sports clubs, but there are also clubs for students who might not feel comfortable in those settings. For example, the students in the Anime Club are not the jocks, or the musicians, or the brains, or the thespians or the ... anything. But they have found a welcoming home in the library.

**What's the best way to involve parents in their children's educations?**
Our school has made parent-teacher communication a priority. And it's not just about infractions. Each teacher is encouraged (and given time) to reach out to parents regularly about the positive things their children have done.

**If money were no object ...**
I would give every student and teacher his or her own personal tablet preloaded with textbooks and supplemental reading, with access to ebooks and audiobooks. Every classroom would have a white board. That said, even the most powerful tool becomes useless in the hands of someone who has not been taught how to use it, so I would add training.

**What is the most important school climate issue?**
Respect. To encourage respect, we implemented a Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports system and began Link Crew, which pairs high school sophomores with incoming freshman. We have an anti-bullying club, which boasts about 50 members, and the Gay Straight Alliance also offers opportunities to support and encourage others who face bullying every day.

**Your colleague describes you as a “proactive ally” of the Gay Straight Alliance. How so?**
It's about the little things—a friendly smile, a wave hello, eye contact. All of these things tell someone you accept them. Also, I am not afraid to speak up about unacceptable behavior or language. Knowing this, students feel safe in the library.

**What have you done to create an inclusive environment?**
We work very closely with our ESL and
Life Skills teachers and know that it is extremely important to speak respectfully to their students; many people treat them with condescension or even disdain. Our Life Skills students read stories from *Dear Bully*, edited by Megan Kelley Hall and Carrie Jones, and discussed their experiences. I arranged for one of the authors, A.S. King, to visit the school. It was a wonderful chance for the students to relate their learning to real life.

**Was there ever an incident of bias you wished you’d handled differently?**
Absolutely! I was once accused of being racist for asking an African-American student to leave for disrupting my class. I was hurt and unfortunately raised my voice in anger. Luckily, over time, the student and I recovered our relationship.

**What is the greatest lesson you’ve learned from students?**
Children have just as many worries and problems as any adult; sometimes they have more. We never know what people carry around with them. Any small act of kindness or cruelty can make or break a person’s day. When we approach people with compassion, understanding and love, they generally respond with the same.

**What are your favorite books on social justice issues?**
One of my all-time favorite books is *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee with its subtle themes of women’s rights and children’s issues. Another book I have recommended many times is *Mississippi Trial, 1955* by Chris Crowe. Told through the eyes of children, these stories show us how things really are and how things ought to be.

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**Down the Hall**
Know an excellent administrator, librarian or counselor we should interview? Email us at editor@tolerance.org and put “Down the Hall” in the subject line.

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**Lessons Learned**
We post lessons online each week. Activities are grade-specific and address a range of issues. Here are five of the most-visited in recent months. Find them at tolerance.org/activities.

**Female Identity and Gender Expectations**
*(Middle and High Schools)*
This four-lesson series explores different aspects of gender for today’s girls and women.

**Reading Ads with a Social Justice Lens**
*(Early Grades)*
This lesson series opens up important conversations about the relationship between advertisements and social justice. Children will see that they have the power to decide how media will influence them.

**Beyond Rosa Parks: Powerful Voices for Civil Rights and Social Justice**
*(Middle and High Schools)*
Students learn how Maya Angelou overcame hardship and discrimination to find her own voice and to influence others to use their voices for positive change.

**Introducing Kids to the Idea of Environmental Racism**
*(Early Grades)*
In this lesson, students participate in an activity designed to simulate the inequity of environmental racism.