

## A Soundtrack of a Lifetime

The camera on WhatsApp wouldn't focus. My grandfather, the man who taught me how to play Rummy, who told me stories of conducting trains from Secunderabad to Dornakal, sat frozen on the screen. My hands shook as I waited for the image to sharpen, but when it did, I barely recognized him. The stroke that paralyzed half of his body left him frail and weak. His eyes searched for someone familiar, but the room stayed empty. I tried to talk to my grandfather, but my words couldn't reach him. So I turned to the one language we still shared: music. I lifted my trumpet and played his favorite song, “गुलाबी आँखें” (*Rosy Eyes*). But it wasn't enough to bridge 8523 miles. I wanted to be there, to sit by his side, yet all I could do was watch through a screen.

Weeks later, during the summer of last year, passing a nursing home, I realized I might not be able to reach my grandfather, but that there were people I could be there for. That's how I found Monarch Hospice. My afternoons were filled with quiet routines: wheeling residents to dinner, listening to Ray's stories about his travels around the world, and helping Bernard find his underwear, again. In every resident's eyes, I saw my grandfather, a reminder that their illness couldn't diminish their humanity. I saw that most with Ray and his wife, Betty. From painting butterfly lanterns to sharing strawberry ice cream, we spent hours together. Over time, those moments turned us into family. Betty would pull me aside in the hallway, proudly introducing me to her friends as her “favorite visitor,” and Ray would light up every time I walked in. But just as I was settling into this community, I got a call.

Ray was gone.

At the funeral, I stared at Ray's memorial card, his grin frozen in time. It hit me: *how is Betty feeling?* But I couldn't bring myself to talk to her. I couldn't bear standing in that same

silence that had filled my grandfather's room after his stroke. I walked out of the memorial home thinking, *How can I comfort her?*

I thought back to how music gave my grandfather relief, and I knew what I had to do.

I went home and dug out an old iPod Touch and loaded it with songs, each taking her back to a cherished memory: Ray and Betty's first dance (*Unchained Melody*), the song Ray proposed to her (*Moon River*), the lullabies they sang to their kids (*You Are My Sunshine*). When I brought it to her the next day, she pressed play, and her eyes lit up. With tears in her eyes, she said, "I can feel Ray with me." Watching Betty, I realized the music was my way of reaching her when words couldn't, a bridge that helped her find solace in Ray's memory, proof that his love hadn't left with him. But as I walked back home, I couldn't stop thinking about the other residents, the other people sitting alone. If music could help Betty, why not others?

So I kept going, bringing that same companionship to other residents at Monarch Hospice. Not only did the MP3s remind residents that they were more than their illness, but they also gave residents a way to tell their stories, whether to me or others. Bernard's filled with Elvis Presley, taking him back to long nights on the wrestling mat. Elena's with Pedro Infante, evoking her childhood in Mexico. Over time, what started as a small gesture grew into something I continue today: *A Soundtrack of a Lifetime*, a project dedicated to helping spread music and kindness to our senior citizens.

As the playlists multiplied, so did the moments they created, and before I knew it, music had become something much more than just the tunes in the lobby. With each new playlist, another door opened, connecting past to present, heart-to-heart. It was as if I were writing a story for each of my residents, one that helped them not only remember the past but also share it with

everyone around them, from family to passing nurses. Whether it was watching someone's eyes light up or seeing families get closer, I could see how those moments grew beyond my time at hospice, extending into hearts far beyond those walls.

And in seeing those connections form, I understood that even though I never got to sit with my grandfather, the same music that bridged gaps for the residents had shown me another way forward. Every playlist taught me that making a difference isn't about grand gestures. It's about choosing to see people, using whatever language you can: music, a hand squeeze, a shared memory. That's the person I see myself as: someone present, so when a grandchild calls, their loved one isn't alone.







The Kindness Club at [REDACTED] High School

Name of project, what, when, where?

My kindness project is the Kindness Club at [REDACTED] High School. I am the founding co-president, leading a group of twenty students from all grades every other week for an hour. We plan events, make blankets for and feed the homeless, write thoughtful notes to retirement home members, create flyers for school, fund raise, arrange bake sales, coat drives, and give kindness awards/recognition to others at our school. We even have awarded those who stand out in their efforts with a kindness crown! 😊 This club's duration is for the academic school years 2024-26, but the leadership will be passed on to a [REDACTED] junior for next year.

How did it/does it make a ripple to change the world?

Our club makes a ripple in the world through small acts of kindness, carried out and noticed by others who then want to join in on the activities. People in our club make a personal commitment to make a positive impact on not only those close to them, but to the world as a whole, touching members of our community in unexpected ways. One way I feel we've accomplished this has been through our club time in which we write letters to children in hospitals. It is a small act, but one that spreads reassurance, encouragement, and love to the broader KC area. In our club we strive to be the joy someone finds in their day, and I feel personalized, doodled-in, letters of love can truly help someone in need, and make a ripple in the world for good.

How did the ripple impact you and others?

The ripple impacts my awareness of how even small gestures, like sending a note to elderly people who may feel lonely, or offering blankets to the homeless or working in a food kitchen and shelter -- can make big difference in a person's day and outlook. It is such little effort to brighten another's day for those you serve and for yourself, and to inspire others to do the same.

### Quotes from participant

In [REDACTED] monthly publication, *Le Journal*, our club was featured in an article entitled, “Angelic Actions.” Highlighted within were the many service opportunities in Kansas City that help spread kindness during the holiday season. A quote specific to our kindness club was, “Volunteering really gives you a sense of purpose and compassion for those around you ... You never know what others are going through, but volunteering gives exposure to the hardships of the community. My personal favorite place to volunteer is Uplift. It’s a really amazing organization that works with the homeless in Kansas City. You can sort clothes, make care packages, and organize their warehouse, or help deliver resources in the community.”

### Specific amount of time

I have led this club for two years. The club will be passed down to an enthusiastic upperclassman who shares our same passion for spreading kindness in our KC community. The club will continue, hopefully, indefinitely. Although our club meets every other week for an hour, as co-president, several more hours each week are spent planning and preparing for meeting and events ahead.

### Why I chose this project

I chose this project because its purpose and goals resonated with me at a deep level. It comes naturally to me to think of and care for others. People have described me as being very empathetic and emotionally considerate. I see others, notice and feel deeply and this awareness of needs drives my desire to take action. The needs around us can feel overwhelming but the work we do in this club shows us that even little things make a difference and there is a sense of increased hope for a better world. I love what Mother Teresa said, “Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love” – it is exactly what drives our Kindness Club and why I chose this project.

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Kindness Club

BLANKET AND COAT  
*Drive*

DECEMBER 1-13

Help keep the homeless warm!  
Drive for Our Sisters Poor of Jesus Christ  
Drop off by the front office



# Coffee & Cards

Writing cards for hospitalized children



Where and when?  
McLains in Overland Park  
10am ish December 1st



# KINDNESS CLUB



**FRONT ROW** Violet Hrabec (9), Ava Meyer (9), Caroline Deacon (12),  
 Ava Wickenhauser (11), Jordan Burgess (9) **SECOND ROW** Karleigh  
 Miller (11), Liliwyn Cox (11), Madeline Green (11), Claire Steiner (10),  
 Daniella Johnson (10), Evelyn Cramer (10) **THIRD ROW** Audrey Lockett  
 (11), Claire Weber (10), Lou Ingram (9), Georgia Heilman (10), Abigail  
 Guerra (10) **FOURTH ROW** Kelly Frank (9), Grace Lutman (9), Madeline  
 Johnson (9), Ainslie Miller (9), Kyliegh Saffold (11), Zoë Miller (10) **NOT**  
**PICTURED** Hazel Mallory (9), Richard Shrock (Advisor)

## Beyond Awareness: Building a Kinder, Stronger Community Through Mental Health

### Advocacy

In October 2024, I started a mental health and kindness initiative through the Youth Leadership Advisory Board of Hays with the goal of creating more supportive, inclusive environments in schools. This project, which remains ongoing, focuses on helping students understand mental health, reducing bullying, and empowering people to reach out when they need help. Rather than being a one-time event or campaign, the initiative has grown into a long-term effort that now reaches both high schools in Hays and is preparing to expand into middle and elementary schools. My intention was simple: if students feel seen, supported, and valued, school becomes a safer place for everyone.



The project began after conversations within the Youth Leadership Advisory Board revealed that many students were struggling privately with stress, anxiety, exclusion, or bullying. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, one in six youth experience a mental-health challenge each year, and supportive school environments dramatically increase the likelihood of students seeking help. We recognized a need for student-led education—something created by peers, for peers. That is when I committed to developing a series of presentations built around three pillars: kindness, mental-health awareness, and bullying prevention.

I designed interactive presentations and activities that encouraged students to reflect on how they treat others, how their words impact the people around them, and how mental health plays a role in everyday life. With the support of the Board, we launched our first sessions at the two high schools in Hays. Our goal was not only to educate, but also to open conversations that schools sometimes struggle to start. Students were encouraged to participate, ask questions, and share their experiences. The honest responses showed us how needed this project truly was.



What made the greatest difference was the personal connection. During and after presentations, students approached me to talk about their own struggles with stress, friendship issues, or bullying. One student told me, “I finally feel more comfortable reaching out and asking for help because someone my age talked about it openly.” Another said, “Hearing this made me realize I’m not the only one who feels overwhelmed sometimes.” These conversations reinforced why this initiative matters. When people feel less alone, their entire outlook changes.

The ripple effect became visible quickly. Teachers mentioned that students were using more respectful language in classrooms. Counselors shared that more students were coming in to ask questions about coping skills and resources. Even small interactions—students offering encouragement to each other before a test or standing up when they saw someone being excluded—showed the impact of the message we were spreading. The initiative was not just about information; it was about building habits of kindness.

As the project continued, our team focused on expanding beyond high schools. Reaching middle school students became a priority because this is often when students first begin experiencing social pressure and bullying. We began meeting with administrators to schedule presentations and adapt the content to a younger age group. We also drafted plans for simplified, interactive versions that could eventually be delivered to elementary students. The long-term vision is to create a consistent message across the entire district continuum of kindness and mental-health awareness starting at an early age.

The experience changed me as well. Before this project, I knew mental health was important, but I did not fully understand how deeply it affects students’ confidence, daily functioning, and overall well-being. Standing in front of classrooms, sharing information, and listening to students’ experiences taught me that kindness is not a small or optional gesture. It is a

protective factor. It is a form of leadership. It is a way of shaping an environment where people feel safe to be themselves.

One of the most powerful moments came after a presentation when a student approached me and said, “This made me feel like someone finally understands what I’m going through.” Hearing that solidified the meaning of this project for me. It reminded me why mental-health advocacy matters—not in theory, but in actual human experience. It showed that people are looking for connection, reassurance, and kindness even when they do not say it out loud.

As our initiative grew, I incorporated data from national organizations to support the message. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that positive school environments decrease bullying and improve overall student mental health. By showing students and staff that the benefits are real and measurable, we gained strong support from administrators and teachers. This collaboration helped us build momentum toward our next goal: taking the program statewide. Expanding beyond Hays would allow more communities to adopt similar presentations and resources, creating a larger ripple of compassion and awareness throughout Kansas.

The duration of the project is ongoing, and intentionally so. Mental health is not a trend or temporary concern. It shifts with life circumstances, academic challenges, and personal growth. Likewise, bullying does not disappear in a single year. My commitment to this initiative extends into the future, with hopes of training more student leaders to carry it forward as I prepare for life after high school.

I chose this project because mental health has always been important to me. I have witnessed peers feel isolated, unheard, or misunderstood because they were afraid to talk about

what they were experiencing. At the same time, I have seen the difference kindness makes—how one supportive conversation can change someone’s entire day. I wanted to be part of the solution, to create safe spaces where students feel comfortable asking for help and supporting each other. This project allows me to transform compassion into action and make a positive impact that lasts longer than a single school year.

Ultimately, the ripple of this initiative reaches beyond presentations. It lives in the daily choices students make—to sit with someone who looks alone, to check in on a friend, to think before speaking, or to encourage a classmate who seems overwhelmed. These are the ordinary moments that build stronger schools and stronger communities. The heart of the project is simple: when we understand mental health and treat each other with kindness, we create a world where everyone feels valued.



This mental health initiative started as a school project, but it has become a movement—one built on empathy, awareness, and positive change. I hope it continues to grow, inspire other

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youth leaders, and support students across Kansas. The ripple has already begun, and I am committed to carrying it forward.

## Kindness in A Can: The [REDACTED] District Food Pantry

Kindness often goes unnoticed, it is quiet and certainly does not boast. Similarly, hunger and basic needs are overlooked due to stigmas. A simple meal, warm coat, and community can make a true difference in someone's life. Everyone, no matter where they live, their financial status, or their race deserves access to essential resources. An important resource in my community is the [REDACTED] Food Pantry that is located at the [REDACTED] District Office, in Kansas City, Kansas. The pantry, which was started in 2022 by Amy Bartlow (a [REDACTED] High School social worker) and Evan Scruggs (class of 2025) serves people that suffer from food insecurities and clothing needs. In the 2025/2026 school year, I both inherited and became inspired by their project and have now committed myself to sustaining and expanding its impact. No [REDACTED] family or student should have to choose between their education and when they might eat next.

The [REDACTED] Clothing Closet and Food Pantry operates as an ongoing project that continues to serve the community once a month. It is now organized by the district social workers in collaboration with myself and the Onward Program. The pantry helps to supply families with essential groceries, hygiene products, and all types of clothing, throughout all months of the year. In the beginning, donations were received through local churches and small businesses. While this helped the program launch, over the last six months, we have been fortunate enough to have students and faculty members within the [REDACTED] School District help keep our shelves stocked with ongoing food drives and incentive challenges. This has included regular clothing donations which has allowed us to alternate products based on weather and holidays, so that families can feel comfortable regardless of the season.

The district of [REDACTED] is often perceived as wealthy, creating an uncomfortable split between families. One of the social workers that aids with the pantry stated, “The pantry allowed

community members to feel comfortable in coming to school for resources. [REDACTED] is a wealthier district so there are often stigmas when needing help. We help make it less shameful.” The pantry was created to limit the common stigmas that might cause embarrassment. When the pantry first began in 2022, it served ten to fifteen families per month. Now, during the month of November, the pantry assisted twenty-six families and, in December, twenty-four families used the pantry as a resource along with sixteen receiving clothes from the Clothing Closet. Along with that, more than 30 families received gifts from the Holiday Gift Drive helping them provide gifts to their children for the Christmas season.

The ripple effect of the Pantry and Clothing Closet reaches far beyond my community of [REDACTED]. Wyandotte County public health data shows, food insecurity remains a persistent challenge for many local families (approximately thirteen percent), particularly those with school-aged children. Community food resources, such as school pantries, help to connect that large gap by providing consistent and stigma-free access to necessities (Unified Government Public Health Department). Therefore one and seven people in Wyandotte County suffer from food insecurities. This is an alarming statistic and proves why the [REDACTED] Food Pantry is a vital part of our community.

When I first learned about the project, I knew this was a perfect fit for me. Growing up with a mother who is a social worker and a father who is always willing to lend a hand, community service has always been an integral part of my life. Watching my mother’s constant dedication to her career and the communities she served has instilled in me a passion for advocating and has inspired me to follow in her footsteps as a social worker. Through my parents and their willingness to give back to communities and families in need, I have learned that kindness and compassion are powerful tools that can help others feel safe from judgement.

For every family that has been served at the Piper Pantry the impact is concrete. There is a preserved sense of dignity when families no longer have to worry about choosing between necessities like buying food for the week or clothes for their children. With every family we serve, our kindness expands throughout the community and the ripple effect teaches kindness, empathy and, above all, compassion for our neighbors.

The [REDACTED] Food Pantry continues to grow and is more effective than ever. As a student leader, my goal is to continue advocating for this powerful resource and, potentially, supporting the creation of additional pantries or developing partnerships with other pantries in the Wyandotte County area. Food insecurity can unfortunately make people feel isolated. As a larger community, we have the opportunity to help those people feel seen and supported. The [REDACTED] District Food and Clothing Pantry demonstrates that even when need is hidden, kindness can uncover it, and meet it with double the compassion.

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**Project Title: Open Edges**

It began as a joke while arranging decorations for a school dance; the poster borders refused to align, and someone muttered, “Just leave it. Open edges.” The phrase lodged itself in my mind. Over time, it evolved from a quip into a philosophy that spaces, like people, become more vibrant when their boundaries are permeable. What struck me was not the imperfection of the edges, but the quiet permission they granted to breathe, to invite, and to resist the impulse to seal everything neatly shut. In that small moment, I sensed how much energy is spent trying to make things appear complete instead of allowing them to remain open to growth.

I began noticing edges everywhere, between new students and familiar circles, confidence and hesitation, voices that filled a room and those that hovered just outside it. Learning to connect across those edges gradually shaped how I lead and how I listen. I became more attentive to pauses in conversation, to who spoke easily and who waited, and to how often exclusion happens unintentionally.

After moving states, I knew the ache of hovering at the margin of a cafeteria, the clatter of trays amplifying isolation. When I saw a new student standing alone with a tray in hand, I invited her to sit with me. That simple gesture became a friendship and later a lesson in leadership.

Inclusion, I learned, is rarely dramatic. It grows from small, deliberate acts of attention. Those acts require noticing discomfort before it hardens into distance.

As ASB Lead Event Coordinator, I saw how easily groups hardened around their ideas. Planning Homecoming, clubs guarded themes like territory. I encouraged us to blend concepts instead of defending them. Tension softened into collaboration, and the final event reflected many voices

rather than one. The experience showed me that creativity expands when ownership becomes shared and when disagreement is treated as a possibility rather than a threat. I learned that leadership does not mean deciding alone, but designing conditions where others feel safe contributing.

This philosophy guided the Student Voice Forums I organized. I expected logistical concerns but heard deeper needs for rest, safety, and belonging. Those conversations led to the creation of the Belonging Garden, a space designed for pause and reflection. Its open paths and flexible seating intentionally resist enclosure, mirroring the values that shaped it. Students now use the space not only to rest, but to talk, reflect, and exist without pressure.

Open Edges did not remain a philosophy. It became a kindness project with structure, continuity, and purpose. I realized that ideas only matter when they take form and remain accessible to others.

My kindness project is a nonprofit dance program I founded to expand access to movement education for underserved youth. The project began during my sophomore year of high school and remains ongoing. I created it for students who wanted to dance but could not afford studio tuition, competition fees, costumes, or transportation. Many of the children I serve come from immigrant households and working class families. Some arrive unsure of themselves, carrying hesitation shaped by years of limited opportunity.

I chose this project because dance was once inaccessible to me as well. I saw how talent alone was never enough without resources. Studios quietly filtered students by cost rather than commitment. I wanted to build a space where effort mattered more than income and where participation was not conditional. That decision felt personal, but it quickly became communal.

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Classes are held weekly in donated spaces, including garages and community rooms. I design lesson plans, choreograph routines, organize rehearsals, and teach technique. The program has no auditions and no required equipment. Students are encouraged to explore movement at their own pace and to share dances from their cultural backgrounds. Latin rhythms, traditional steps learned at home, and personal storytelling all shape our choreography. Each class becomes a conversation expressed through motion rather than words.

The ripple effect of this project begins with access. When students are welcomed without financial barriers, they show up differently. One parent shared that her daughter used to avoid group activities but now waits eagerly for class days. Another told me dance became the first place their child felt confident expressing themselves publicly. These moments do not appear on trophies or programs, but they compound quietly. Confidence grows in repetition, not applause.

The ripple spreads outward. Parents attend informal showcases. Siblings join rehearsals. Families linger after class to talk. What starts as a dance lesson becomes community. Students teach each other steps from their cultures, blending heritage with new movement. They learn to take pride in where they come from while feeling accepted where they are. In those moments, culture is not performed for approval but shared with care.

This project also changed me. Teaching without hierarchy forced me to listen more closely. I learned to adapt choreography for different physical abilities and comfort levels. I learned that kindness requires planning, consistency, and accountability. A welcoming space does not sustain itself. Someone must maintain it. I became that person willingly, understanding that care is an ongoing commitment.

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According to the National Endowment for the Arts, students with access to arts education demonstrate increased engagement and confidence. My experience reflects this. Attendance remains consistent. Students return week after week because they feel safe and seen. The impact is not theoretical. It is visible. It appears in posture, laughter, and willingness to try again.

Open Edges is about refusing to close spaces that can hold more people. It is about recognizing where systems exclude and choosing to widen them deliberately. Kindness is not a single act. It is a structure that allows others to enter.

## Community Service League Kindness

I never thought I would be volunteering at the community's food pantry every week. When I started High School, I did not participate in many activities, other than tutoring for the A+ program. Later in my sophomore year, I learned more about the National Honor Society (NHS) and what the organization did. One of the requirements was to do multiple volunteer activities. One of the activities I did was a food pantry in my community called the Community Service League (CSL). I was first going there for hours; however, after I got my NHS hours, I kept going there to help the community out. Therefore, I have had the kindness to help out the Community Service League after the NHS hours by getting homeless people food items, helping them get the best experience, and helping put items into their cars.

The kindness project that I have had has been helping the Community Service League. Originally, it was for the NHS, but now I just go there for kindness and to help out the community. Ever since I started going there, I have always said to people, "I like the people I volunteer with at the Community Service League" ( [REDACTED] ). I enjoy getting to know them and getting to help out people in need in the community. I started volunteering at the Community Service League in June of 2024. I am still volunteering at CSL today. However, they are only open two days during the week, which are Tuesdays and Thursdays. Therefore, I try my best to come on most Tuesdays and Thursdays when they are open to help them out and spread kindness in the community. My presence at the CSL has had an impact on the world.

My work at the Community Service League has a significant ripple on the world because it allows more tasks to get done at the CSL and allows more families to get food for their families. If I were not there, the other volunteers might not have been able to put as many food

items out for the low-income families. I further make a ripple in the world by helping out some of the older volunteers with tasks at the CSL. Amanda Worley, the Community Service League manager, said that “The reality of volunteering is that the population that do want to volunteer are older and mostly retired. Most have doctor's appointments, health conditions, and can catch the germs we see so much easier than us young people. They feel a sense of relief knowing you are there. Whether it's to help them keep up, help them if they fall behind, and help life things they cannot” (Amanda Worley). Furthermore, I impact the CSL because I can help out with the tasks that the older people have a harder time doing, whether it would be remembering a certain section or message or helping pick up a mess. This kindness has had an everlasting impact on me in my life.

This kindness project has had a major ripple on my life in many ways, including preparing me for the workforce. Before going to the CSL, I was not that social. My social life was talking to a few friends and my family. However, that was about it for my social life. When I came to the CSL, I did not have very many social skills and was quiet. While working here, I had the goal to open up more and talk to more people and grow my social skills. Now, about a year later, after starting this kindness project, I am better at starting conversations with people, especially at the CSL. There are times I talk to new volunteers and say, “What are you volunteering here for?” ( [REDACTED] ) or said, “Have you liked volunteering here so far?” (Brenton Feagans). This activity has helped my social skills. This kindness project has shown me what the workforce is like. I never worked at any job before coming to the CSL; however, the CSL allowed me to see what the workforce somewhat looked like. I learned about how to be nice to people, how to stock, how to count up points, how to bag people's items, and how to put items into people's cars. This helped me learn what it is like to work in the workforce in a fun way

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because the volunteers were nice. I chose this activity because of NHS hours, but have been coming back to learn more, help out more, and hang out more with the great volunteers there. It means a lot to me because it has taught me a bunch of information and gives me the ability to help families in need of food. I am glad I did this kindness project, it rippled my life in many ways.

At the Community Service League, I helped out by providing people with the best possible experience, distributing food items, and assisting with loading items into their cars, which is part of my kindness project. In June of 2024, I started working at the CSL and have helped the local food pantry since then. My help to the people had a ripple effect in the world, allowing more people to get food for their families. This kindness activity had a ripple on me by allowing me to see how the workforce is and allowing me to socialize more. Kindness can have a huge impact on your life, as it did on my life.

