

FEATURE





The image features a 3D isometric design on a teal background with a white grid. The title "LIBRARY WALLS" is rendered in large, white, 3D block letters with red and white sides, arranged in a slightly curved path. Below it, the words "THE FOUR WALLS" are written in a bold, dark blue, sans-serif font. The background includes decorative elements like a zigzag line and a cluster of dots in the top right corner.

LIBRARY WALLS

THE FOUR WALLS

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Sometimes the bullying got so bad, Jay Monroe* would not even go into the school building after being dropped off. “Or he would go in and walk right out, just wander the neighborhood,” recalls his mom Tanya.

Jay was raised by a single mother, whose jobs sometimes could not cover rent. For a time Jay and his mom had to stay at shelters, even while Tanya was working full time. By the time he was 12 years old, he had bounced around several schools in Essex and Hudson counties, and was often the victim of bullying, encountering teachers sometimes unwilling, or unable, to put a stop to it. By 2017, when he enrolled at the Dr. Michael Conti School (PS #5) in Jersey City, he had little hope things would be any better.

Adults who first meet Jay note his kind eyes that bespeak an old soul. He is soft-spoken, unfailingly polite, and usually not prone to confrontation. I first met Jay in the Conti school library where he had come, in his words, “to hide out,” not wanting to be in yet another new classroom, terrified of facing a new group of students. He initially seemed inconsolable; it took our crisis intervention teacher Lou DeCarlo and guidance counselor Emma Santiago Hernandez several turns to soothe and coax him into attending his classes.

Jay finally mustered the courage to meet his new teachers and classmates, and by the end of the day he felt a glimmer of hope. “The kids all introduced themselves, looked me in the eye...and the teachers [special education/homeroom teacher Iraida Cesar and paraprofessional Esther Rentas] kept checking in to see if I was comfortable. It felt different, definitely.”

Tanya Monroe says that for her son, the ensuing two years at Dr. Michael

Conti School were an epiphany. “He used to often be shut down because a child was expected to just sit, stay silent, accept things as they are... Here, they treated him as a *person*—a member of an extended family—with *respect*—something he never had in a school setting before!”

Prioritizing Kindness and Inclusion

My own personal story is different from Jay’s, but like him, I know firsthand that a child’s attitude toward learning, how they view themselves, how they see their place in the world is tremendously affected by the kindness—or lack thereof—in a school’s culture.

Many decades ago, at the age of five, I arrived in this country with my parents, who came to America to pursue the immigrants’ dream in the promised land of opportunity. My first day of kindergarten in Houston, I didn’t speak a word of English, but I still remember the warmth and kindness of my teacher and classmates, how they sometimes literally took me by the hand and made me feel welcome. My family stayed in Texas only for a year, and as we moved to various parts of the United States, I was repeatedly “the new kid.” The degree of warmth and welcome varied vastly, depending on the school.

At the Dr. Michael Conti School in Jersey City, New Jersey, where I’m now the school librarian and a literacy support teacher, we have in place a Kindness Initiative woven into the curriculum, where educators, administrators, and parents pledge to promote a climate where students feel accepted. As they progress from pre-K through middle school, students are exposed to social justice literature designed to get them to empathize with others. Having kids connect with characters in a book

is just the first step to getting them to care about the way inequality and unfairness plays out in the real world. Ultimately, we want them to feel empowered to try and do something about injustice, so we’re big into project-based learning (PBL) that encourages students to *value and practice kindness*. In this way, a “safe space” isn’t limited to a physical space, be it a library or a classroom, but



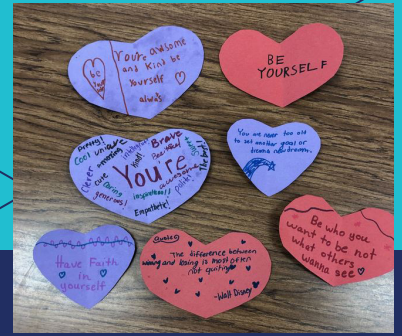
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becomes a mindset that potentially affects the whole school community.

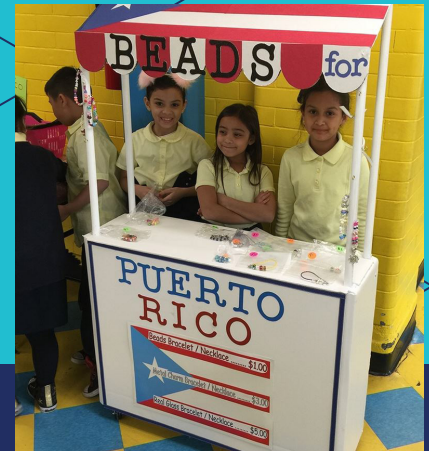
For example, in autumn, after read-alouds of Jacqueline Woodson’s *Each Kindness* (where the narrator Chloe and her classmates repeatedly reject a new classmate), our primary-grade students begin tracking their own daily acts of kindness, written with a marker on a big orange vegetable nicknamed the “Pump-Kind.” Our

fifth-grade students read the same book, but they re-write the story from the viewpoint of Maya, the character in Woodson's story who was shunned by her peers. Our fifth graders later write anonymous compliments to send to classmates. On Valentine's Day, fifth-grade classes celebrate friendship by decorating paper hearts with words of encouragement for their classmates. Students randomly post the affirmations around the school in the hopes that they will help brighten someone's day.



Student "Pump-Kinds" and heart affirmations to sprinkle around our school.

Our elementary students are taught to value being kind to those outside the school community as well. Students in grades 2-4 read books by Roald Dahl, like *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *Matilda*, and *The BFG*, and are taught about the social inequities that exist in the world. *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* enables them to recognize the real challenges other families face, and *Matilda* conveys a comforting message that "You are not alone!" As a result of learning that message second graders initiated the Empathy Bead Project. The students designed and sold bracelets and necklaces with unique beaded patterns to collect relief funds for hurricane victims via UNICEF. In addition to the gratification of helping those in need, our budding entrepreneurs learned about economics including concepts like goods and services, cost and profit, and supply and demand.



Students making and selling empathy beads to raise funds for UNICEF.

Read-alouds of books like William Miller's *Richard Wright and the Library Card* or Rose Blue's *Ron's Big Mission* teach students about taking access to books for granted. Our third graders initiated a book drive to benefit the kids at York Street Project, a non-profit organization helping families in need break the cycle of poverty. The student-led drive was a huge success, collecting an overwhelming amount of



Third-graders organize a book drive and deliver the literary bounty to the daycare at York Street Project.

books. Our third graders sorted the donations by reading level, placed them in decorated boxes, and then created personalized bookmarks to send along with the books. The students were grateful that they were able to share the love of reading with children and families in our community.

Kindness also extends to non-human creatures. Sixth graders recently presented more than twenty boxes of pet supplies and food, as well as cash donations, to the Liberty Humane Society. The donated items were collected through a drive organized by students as an extension of class discussions on issues concerning animal rights (found in books like *Charlotte's Web*); students explored ways to help neglected and abused animals.

Our students are learning from a young age that being kind and charitable are attributes worthy of excelling at, just like academics or sports—areas in which students traditionally receive affirmation. Students in primary grades took it upon themselves to raise awareness about Type 1 Diabetes, creating an informational bulletin board for our school lobby and raising funds for the Junior Diabetes Research Foundation. Additionally, a second grader, unprompted, spent his weekend holding a bake sale on his front stoop to raise funds for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society's Pennies for Patients Drive.

Student Voice and Empowerment

"Making an impact on the world, one project at a time!" is the motto by which our students approach their project-based learning.

While reading *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton, our seventh graders, facilitated by inclusion teacher Taylor Jackson, took concrete steps this past

year to combat bullying, something all too common among adolescents and something kids like Jay Monroe had felt powerless to address at his prior schools. A student-led inclusive community council was formed; the council's mission is to encourage mental health awareness and address social isolation among the student population. The council plans programs to encourage student outreach, such as the Know Your Classmates event. During this event, middle school students sit with someone they normally would not sit with during lunch, engaging in casual conversation and making new connections.

As part of Conti's inclusive community initiative, our eighth graders were assigned to read Aisha Saeed's best-selling novel *Amal Unbound* in their English class. The book tells the story of a Pakistani girl's dream of receiving an education, which falls apart when she is forced into indentured servitude. Inspired by Malala Yousafzai and untold girls like her, this book had our students contemplating issues like class and gender inequities, resistance, and social justice.

Amal Unbound also led students to explore ways to take an active role in their community to build pride and a sense of ownership. Their plan to transform a blighted area near our school into a lush community garden, with "buddy benches" to remind visitors about the importance of inclusion, is now in the process of becoming reality.

Leading up to these projects, several students engaged in our school's first-ever series of TEDEd Student Talks. Topics covered included ways Conti teens are leading the sustainability movement in Jersey City, how a child found comfort in literature after the death of a pet, how another student found happiness after her parents'

divorce, why being an only child is awesome, and the negative effects of being labelled "cute." The TEDEd Student Talks engaged and impressed the audience made up of peers, teachers, administrators, school board members, and local politicians; but most importantly, the talks gave our students a forum to share their observations, their concerns, and their stories.

The Dr. Michael Conti School has also expanded its original kindness initiative committee to include student representatives along with administrators, teachers, and parents; the committee coordinates activities promoting unity and a sense of belonging among the *entire* student body, not just among middle schoolers. After visiting primary-grade classes to present read-alouds of *The Mitten Tree* by Candace Christiansen, members of the kindness initiative committee created a PS5 Mitten Tree by collecting new winter mittens/gloves, hats, socks, and scarves to hang on the tree. The winter wear and cash donations were donated to the Hudson United Way.

Giving students a voice, empowering them to make a difference, acknowledging that their input is worthwhile—all these were revelations to students like Jay Monroe, whose confidence grew as he realized his opinions matter, too.

Culturally Relevant Teaching

Facilitating PBL that covers real-world issues that are relevant to students' lives and interests is just as important as amplifying student voice. For the past two years, Conti faculty and staff, under



the leadership of principal John J. Rivero and assistant principal Alan LaMonica, have researched and learned about Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT), read Zaretta Hammond's *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*, and engaged in lively, sometimes uncomfortable, discussions exploring our implicit biases. Integrating culturally responsive pedagogy is an ongoing process that begins with building trust and creating social-emotional partnerships. As principal Rivero explains, "CRT leads to deeper, higher levels of learning and helps close the achievement gap...By addressing the diverse cultural, racial, and language diversity of our students, our goal is to make learning meaningful for them."

In prior years, our seventh graders read *To Kill a Mockingbird*, raising questions about the penal justice system in America and exploring the Second Amendment and gun control. For this project students used both primary and secondary sources, interviewed stakeholders like police officers, legislators, and families affected by gun violence, produced editorials for a school newsletter, and participated in a town hall meeting where they role-played the varied positions on this heated issue.

Our eighth graders examined the effects of gentrification on the economic, social, and racial landscape of our city. Working in teams, students took on the role of TV reporters tasked with producing a news segment. While these projects are designed to teach students the skills to articulate and participate in "discourse in the real world," they also learned that topics like gun control or gentrification are as much social justice issues as they are about safety or real estate.

For the past decade, seventh-grade students at our school have been reading Jerry Spinelli's *Maniac*

Magee, whose main character is homeless. Through PBL, middle school teacher Omar Alvarez's classes studied the impact of homelessness worldwide and in our city. Students created action plans, wrote letters to policymakers, and partnered with local shelters to organize fundraisers. "[The homeless] all have stories," concluded Ed Johns*, a previous seventh grader who visited the Hope House shelter for his research. "We see them like they're nothing. We walk past them because we think they're addicts or alcoholics or lazy, but that's not the case. They all have stories behind them. And they need our help."

Hope House was one of the local shelters where Jay Monroe and his mom had stayed for a period. Making kids aware of real-world struggles their peers may be dealing with is yet another step to discourage bullying and promote kindness.

Seek Community Partnerships

Beginning in 2012 the Dr. Michael Conti School collaborated with the Big Brother Big Sisters organization, which has been hugely successful. The friendships struck between the "Bigs" and "Littles" (as the mentors and mentees are known) have benefited our students greatly. Upon learning about Jay's artistic streak, his mentor got him a sketchbook and has been a stable male role model and sounding board for Jay during the past two years.

The first year he was a student at Conti, Jay's typical after-school routine would entail going to meet his mom at her workplace, and then when her shift ended, they would call the local shelters to see if room was available for them that night.

The Big Brothers Big Sisters of Essex, Hudson, and Union counties recruits many of the mentors for our students from a financial firm, Pershing



Eighth-graders work on turning an unsightly overgrown area into an urban oasis for the community.



During Conti School's week-long Annual Project Gallery Walk kids find their voice via TEDEd Student Talks.



Our Mitten Tree inspired by Candace Christainsen's book of the same name.



Students role-play at a town hall on the issue of gun control.



LLC, headquartered in Jersey City. Upon learning about Jay's situation, Pershing "adopted" Jay and his mom and basically gave them a Christmas for the past two years, including toys, sports equipment, sneakers, clothes, even a bottle of perfume for Tanya. Later, when Tanya eventually secured an apartment she could afford, Pershing asked her to compile a list of items needed to furnish the new abode, providing things like storage lockers, toasters, etc.

Pershing also regularly provides our students with ongoing classes in life skills like financial literacy, writing resumes, applying for scholarships, and succeeding at interviews.



Visiting Hope House shelter to learn ways to help the homeless in Jersey City.



Partnerships with community organizations have also helped Conti families with disaster relief. United Way, Big Brothers Big Sisters, Pershing, and others have stepped forward in several instances where fires decimated our children's homes. Seeing organizations come through with assistance sends the message to our student body that it's okay to ask for help, whether for yourself or for others. Members of our Junior National Honor Society, facilitated by guidance counselor Emma Santiago-Hernandez, are learning not to be shy about reaching out and politely asking for resources. The message of community, of helping each other in times of need, resonated with students like recent class salutatorian Lisa Maldonado*, who didn't give a second thought to donating a pair of prized Air Jordans to a classmate who'd lost their possessions in a fire.



Conti School students with their mentors from the Big Brothers Big Sisters organization.

We also get our kids involved with Cal Ripken's Make a Kid Smile Day, which provides underprivileged children a shopping spree at sporting-goods merchant Modells, and the annual Jersey City Back-2-School giveaway, during which children receive free, supply-filled book bags.



Jay Monroe a few months ago at his 8th-grade graduation from the Dr. Michael Conti School.

came in handy” for the recycling scraps into usable objects project.

This one-time self-described “shy, nervous” young child has grown into a person who exudes a quiet confidence. The child who at one time hated crowds and clung to his mother has now enrolled to study hospitality and tourism at Ferris High School. “I want to help others feel welcome as they travel the world,” Jay explains.

“My son has blossomed,” says Tanya Monroe, her voice cracking. “He has definitely come a long way.”

Jay has now left the Dr. Michael Conti School and matriculated to high school. The “safe space” provided by the Conti school was never meant to be just a physical one, but one that students hopefully internalize and draw assurance from, wherever life may lead them, wherever they may be.

**Student names have been changed to maintain the confidentiality and privacy of minors.*

Conti crisis intervention teacher Lou DeCarlo, who facilitates our school partnership with Big Brothers Big Sisters and other organizations, says seeking out organizations to step in and assist students and their families in a time of need gives students a respite from “having to focus on what they’re missing, or what has been done to them... They have a chance to forget and focus on being kids for a while.”

Jay Monroe Now

Prior to arriving at PS5, Jay’s daily focus was simply physiological survival and safety. To see his development over the past two years is an affirmation of what kindness, support, and amplifying student voice can have on children who may otherwise slip through the cracks.

Jay recalls the project he embarked on this past year. Focused on the

driving question, “*Is recycling only sustainable when profitable?*” students worked diligently to prove that it is not. Using recycled PVC pipe scraps and wheels from a discarded BBQ grill, Jay and his classmates created a fully functioning walker, which they donated to Mike DeFilippis, the son of a Jersey City teacher, to use at the beach. Jay says presenting the walker to Mike felt great. “Doing something for someone else is a powerful feeling!”

Jay says art was always his escape; at his old school, he would draw during class and be roundly reprimanded for it. Here, Jay got to use his artistry in the service of a project, helping to recycle scraps into things he really cared about. And he was praised for his contributions. According to his homeroom teacher Ms. Cesar, Jay’s “creativity and eye for design



Keungsook Sexton is a librarian and literacy support teacher at the Dr. Michael Conti School (PS #5) in Jersey City, NJ. She

was a speaker at the AASL Awards Ceremony at the 2018 American Library Association (ALA) Annual Conference in New Orleans. She and her school’s “Promoting Social Justice Awareness and a Culture of Kindness through Literature & PBL” initiative were recipients of the 2018 AASL Roald Dahl Social Justice Award.

