

Compassion Story of the Month

Month 1, August 2017

With Brattleboro voting overwhelmingly to become part of the international Charter for Compassion, the Reformer and The Commons have agreed to publish a "compassion story of the month." The first of these is offered below. See details below for submitting your own story of compassion.

A Compassion Story

Sue Aldridge, Brattleboro

Compassion. I could fill a book: from the way drivers automatically take turns at the 4-way stop signs in Brattleboro, to the many organizations around the area that provide compassionate support. Last fall a situation arose, like a Phoenix from smoke and ashes, a remarkable act of compassion. Jim Giddings' studio burnt down, and with it about 40 years of his artwork was destroyed- calling out to the hearts of many.

We pride ourselves in this region for our firm foundation in the Arts - so many artists and venues, genres and disciplines! And so support for this artist, who has been woven into our art community for as many years as the years of artwork he lost, built like wildfire (please excuse the expression). Starting with the volunteer fire department and other regional fire departments responding, many friends, neighbors and strangers rallied to give emotional and fundraising support.

One group of neighbors and strangers impressed me particularly with their heartfelt generosity and their different approach. I admit to being biased about this group, as they were a class of 5th and 6th graders at Marlboro Elementary School where I teach Art. Their classroom teacher contacted me to let me know about a 'morning news' discussion the class had. The empathy and compassion they felt for Jim, particularly for the loss of his artwork which represented so many years of growth, learning, and expressing, called them to respond. Artwork being a tangible manifestation of an artist's mind and voice, seemed an inconsolable loss to them. Then one student suggested, "I think we should make some art to give him." So began a collaborative piece the class made and gave to Jim Giddings.

Ideas were voiced: they knew they couldn't replace the work he'd lost - their purpose was to help him past such a difficult time, to voice their empathy, to give him hope and courage to rebuild his studio and restart his art. The images each student-artist chose to create in mono-print and scratchboard reflected this purpose. The careful choices they made in collaging the individual images into one collaborative piece, showed so clearly their unified compassion.

Sometimes I forget that children, being newer to this world, are more grounded in the present and the tangible. They want to feel, and taste, and smell, and see all the world has in it. Sometimes the loss of something tangible requires a gift of

something tangible to represent overwhelming intangibles. Perhaps this is at the root of the age-old question: Why Art? This group of students through their actions and their artistic creation had one answer (I suspect there are more). Art represents and communicates overwhelming intangibles and feelings. Art is a gift of empathy and compassion when words fail. This group 'nailed it'! So did the recipient: Jim Giddings was touched and told the class their art would be the first thing hung on the walls of his new studio when it was built. The day before school ended he invited the group to see their work, the first hung on the walls in his new studio on the other side of the hill in Marlboro. Such a satisfying circle of compassion! And a special 'high-five' to the student with the perception and generous heart who made the original suggestion that started this circle.

Submissions, from Brattleboro area residents, for future publication, not to exceed 650 words, should be emailed to: compassionstory@gmail.com or mailed to: Compassion Story of the Month, c/o Robert Oeser, PO Box 6001, Brattleboro, VT 05302. Please include your name, address, phone number and email address. Earlier submitted stories will automatically be considered in subsequent months.