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Generosity Creates Its Own Ripple Effect

By Traci Evison

UCF Forum columnist

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Sometimes we see an inspirational snippet of film on YouTube, hear an NPR broadcast or listen to a Ted Talk that materializes into action at what seems to be a random point in the future.

A couple years ago, however, I saw a short film at the annual Love Your Shorts Film Festival in Sanford, Fla., that has stuck with me.

This particular short film, *Good Karma \$1*, directed by Jason Berger and Amy Laslett, begins as an examination of advertising man Alex Bogusky's fascination with panhandlers' signs. His goal is to understand the simple form of communication these panhandlers use when creating cardboard signs, but instead the film turns into a lesson of generosity.

Bogusky's first attempt to create his own cardboard signs falls flat because *his* inspiration comes from what he would want to see from the driver's seat of his own car if he were stopped at an intersection. When he takes his signs out for actual panhandlers to review, he learns that he has it all wrong. They give a thumbs-down review because he lacks the proper perspective.

After all, he has a good job, a place to live and plenty of food. Many of the panhandlers he encounters are homeless, some are looking for work, and others are not sure where their next meal will come from. In short, it is hard for him to relate because he's never been in that situation.

Through dialogue with the panhandlers, he gains insight on where they're coming from. He learns to empathize and reaches a place of compassion for their situation.

I decided to try my own version of Good Karma over the past few months.

My first encounter was with a young man named Jason at the entrance to a Best Buy parking lot while I was running weekend errands. He was standing next to a pit bull and holding a cardboard sign that read "Hungry, please help with my next meal." I bought him food at the nearby Taco Bell and returned to drop it off. When I introduced myself and asked his name, he seemed taken aback, but shook my extended hand after a moment's pause. As I left he graciously said, "Thank you."

Later, while I was walking by a downtown church I saw a homeless man setting up his station for the evening in a hidden alcove. He shared my love for animals and was sitting on a sleeping bag surrounded by a mother cat and her litter of kittens.

"You look like you have some good company," I said. "Well, sometimes Mama needs a little help," he replied as he petted several meowing kittens simultaneously. I learned that the stray cat and her litter of kittens joined him most nights. He fed them if he had extra food but mostly they enjoyed his attention and snuggled with him as he slept.

From another man who mumbled, "Excuse me, ma'am, do you have some spare dollars you could give me?" outside of Walgreens, to the panhandler weaving in and out of traffic at a stoplight, I've noticed that homelessness does not discriminate based on age or race or background. It also does not dictate intelligence.

One of the most rewarding things for me in my various interactions was to finally make eye contact and speak to the panhandlers, whether I was able to help them at that moment. I felt a spark, a human connection with each one when I acknowledged them by actually looking at them. I think they become so used to people looking at them with disgust or fear, or looking through them as if they don't exist, that they actually appreciate a simple nod or even a smile.

I think we all want this, really. We all want to be acknowledged as a living creature on the planet and worthy of taking up space, even if the space consists of just a sleeping bag instead of a house.

Bogusky, who was named by Adweek magazine in 2010 as creative director of the decade, says it best near the close of Good Karma \$1, which is now viewable on YouTube: “Generosity has its own energy. And as a culture, I feel like when we create good reasons to be greedy, and those reasons are: Hey, this person’s going to go buy a beer - so better greedy than generous....That idea doesn’t just stay in that one place. It spreads to everything we do...

“Be generous when you’ve got something in your pocket and somebody needs it. It’s not going to be a bad thing. Even if they go buy a beer, they just experienced generosity. You just experienced generosity. And that has a ripple effect.”

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