The Do-It-Ourselves Revolution
by Mirella Ferraz

In these trying times, ordinary people are taking matters in their own hands in extraordinary ways, confronting global problems collectively — and locally.

They’re saving lives by leaving uplifting notes in areas with high suicide rates, teaching people the importance of wild plants on the sidewalks, cleaning up roads while getting fit and connecting with others, and transforming abandoned spaces into bee sanctuaries. Indeed, these everyday people are creating a true do-it-ourselves revolution.

Saving lives

According to the World Health Organization, “more than 700,000 people die by suicide every year, which is one person every 40 seconds.”

When she was struggling with mental health issues and tragically contemplating suicide, Paige Hunter received support from a stranger in a critical moment. Emboldened by that support, she’s since worked to overcome her mental health struggles. Now, she aims to be a beacon of support for others, leaving encouraging handwritten notes on Wearmouth Bridge, in Northampton, England, where suicide attempts are not uncommon.

A thoughtful “note of hope” that Paige Hunter left on Wearmouth Bridge. Credit: Paige Hunter

In a moving social media post, Paige shared: “I have placed 240 of these notes of hope to show that it’s actually alright to not be okay, and I hope that these quotes just help that one person to not go through with suicide and know that they are worthy of living.”

These “notes of hope” have been recognised by mental health workers as well police for their impact and effectiveness in helping to prevent suicide. In fact, it’s estimated that 28 lives have been saved by Hunter’s uplifting notes. Hunter continues to use her voice and online platforms to openly discuss and raise awareness about mental health issues, a topic that is still taboo for many.

Between the cracks

Another kind of silent revolution has begun in France.

Sauvages de ma rue —“The Wild Plants of My Street” teaches people about plants that are simply growing on roads and sidewalks. Participants use chalk on pavements to draw attention to wild flowers and plants in urban areas, helping the general public learn and
understand more about their names and significance.

More than weeds: A member of Sauvages de ma rue identifies a patch of Mexican fleabane on a sidewalk. Credit: Sauvages de ma rue

These interventions have inspired contemplation, and encouraged respect for weeds – which are often misrepresented and misunderstood.

By highlighting the importance of these wild plants for a variety of species, including bees and butterflies, ordinary people have been able to appreciate a bit more their contribution to the ecosystem, whilst learning about the extraordinary botanic world.

The initiative has also inspired similar acts in other countries, such as the More Than Weeds project, set up in the United Kingdom by French botanist and campaigner Sophie Leguil.

In 2017, the country banned the use of pesticides in the streets, forcing cities to change the way they manage urban flora. Leguil explains: “I launched the project after seeing the change in perception that happened in France. I am hoping to educate people about the plants growing around them, and their many benefits — from cleaning air pollution to helping insects as well as their medicinal uses.” Above all, she hopes the project will encourage acceptance of more wilderness in parks and city streets.

Shepherds Purse identified on a city sidewalk Credit: Sophie Leguil

What’s the buzz?

Detroit Hives, a nonprofit organization that builds “educational apiaries” in vacant city lots, was founded by Nicole Lindsey and Timothy Paule in 2017.

By transforming abandoned spaces into beautiful bee farms, Detroit Hives helps ensure that pollinators can survive and propagate. Doing so also builds communities by bringing people together to cultivate local, healthy, diverse and fresh food.

The Detroit Hives: Nicole Lindsey shows children honeybees up close as she teaches them about their lifecycle Credit: Timothy Paule

According to The Bee Conservancy, one in three bites of food we eat gets pollinated by bees. Detroit Hives cultivates gardens for bee colonies, which in turn produce honey and other bioproducts. The people involved in the venture also get to learn about the importance of protecting pollinators, growing food locally, as well as connecting with each other. All of this helps communities thrive.

Running for good

The Good Gym, in the U.K., sponsors teams of runners who “combine getting fit with doing good”.
In addition to running, participants give back by executing physical tasks for community organizations, supporting isolated elders with social visits and assisting them with difficult tasks.

To date, Good Gym participants have completed almost 270,000 of these good deeds.

Examples include picking up litter while running, or clearing a patch of overgrown grass and weeds while jogging, in order to create space for fruit trees to grow.

Ellie, Sophie and Sam completed a run to London’s St. Clement Orchard to clear a patch of overgrown grass and weeds. Credit: Good Gym

These inspiring projects are helping more people to act in alignment with their broader belief systems while doing more of what makes them feel good.

These stories reflect what the activist and pacifist Mahatma Gandhi continually asserted: In order to make a tangible difference in our material conditions, people must “be the change they wish to see in the world.”

After all, community heroes can be anywhere. Every one of us can join this growing team of do-gooders and create lasting change exactly where we are.