

10 Insights from 2021 That Give Us Hope by KarunaVirus Editors

As 2021 dissolves into a new year, KarunaVirus editors reflect on what the past year of witnessing everyday people choose love over fear have taught us.

Unsung Heroes Are Right Under Our Noses

We are taught to look at the stage to see displays of greatness, but it's resoundingly clear that heroes can often be found among the most ordinary, everyday situations.

If you walk into a Walmart late at night, you may just run into a high school principal stocking shelves. In South Carolina, school principal Henry Darby works the night shift after full school days and donates his earnings to his struggling students. Go for an early morning run at the park, and you might meet a community legend. Along the waterfront in St. Petersburg, Florida, Al Nixon sits on an unassuming bench, simply showing up for strangers unconditionally. Drop off your kids at the school bus, and their bus driver may just be one of the nation's top executives. When retired FBI boss and Fortune 500 company exec Mike Mason learned his county's school district was short on bus drivers, he found his "third act" chariotting kids to school.

While a janitor Doramise Moreau quietly feeds thousands, this delivery driver Isaac Oduro works 7 days a week to fund a library at his former elementary school in Ghana. When violence repeatedly escalated at a troubled high school in Louisiana, a group of dads began showing up in school hallways -- their simple presence transformed the school. After serving an unassuming table-for-one, one waitress tears up reading a note left by her guest, a widow, thanking her for helping her get through her first meal out since her husband passed away. In China, one monk finds himself caring for 8,000 stray dogs. In California, a fresh college grad's photo shoot honoring her farmworker parents goes viral. In the UK, a 9-year-old with cerebral palsy is cheered by classmates upon completing his first walk to school.

Adversity Can Be a Gateway for Compassion

As Leonard Cohen's classic song, "Anthem," goes, "There is a crack, a crack in everything; that's how the light gets in." In the past year, we've been witness to countless moments of goodwill whose luminosity finds a place to shine through the cracks of life's unpredictable hardships.

Two years after a family lost their beloved 21-year-old son Trevor in a motorcycle accident, thousands do acts of kindness in his honor, on what would have been his 23rd birthday. In Canada, another motorcycle accident tragically takes Nicole and Brent Keryluke's lives, leaving their two young children. When relatives are forced to auction off the couple's beloved classic car to pay for medical bills, strangers bought

and re-auctioned the car, donating all the earnings to the family. In Virginia, Robbie Pruitt's bike got stolen, he concluded the thief might've needed it to get to work -- a thought that prompted him to fix up anyone's bike for free, and has supplied hundreds of bikes since, forging new friendships along the way. After a car accident in 2012 left Pan Jing paralyzed, she thought her dance career was over; but today, at 34 years of age, she's part of a wheelchair dance team that performs across China. In Toronto, a group compiles love boxes for women in pandemic quarantine at domestic violence shelters. In Cameroon, refugees have turned their desert camp into a thriving forest.

More recently, amid the crises in Afghanistan, the internet raised \$6 million in one day to help evacuate at-risk Afghans. Many people draw from their own memories of plight and tumultuous transitions to ease the experiences of others. In Scotland, the daughter of a German refugee in Scotland gifted an Afghan family a new home, citing the kindness and humanity that had helped her family survive when they were new refugees. Across the Atlantic, nurse Tram Pham finds herself supporting some of the tens of thousands of Afghan refugees passing through the same medical clinic where she was comforted by nurses as a 22-year-old refugee from Vietnam.

Ordinary People Can Make Food And Shelter Abound

Around the globe, the pandemic has accelerated efforts to provide the basics of food and shelter for all.

Villages of tiny homes (and even micro homes) have sprung up as temporary housing for the homeless in cities like Los Angeles, Oakland, Seattle, St. Louis, and South Carolina. The first 3D-printed home in Austin, Texas will house 70-year-old Tim Shea, who was previously homeless. In York, UK, innovative nap pads even have the ability to monitor vital signs of those using them, and send alerts if breathing stops. This year, we were also witness to instances of homeowners opening up their backyards to house homeless strangers-turned-strangers-turned-friends. Some have extended this care into the animal kingdom, like an architect in Istanbul who began creating homes to house stray cats.

Another trend that made us smile across the pandemic is a global outpouring of food offerings for anyone who opens its door.

In Poland, a self-service 'honesty shop' offers hikers fresh fruits, jams, and juices all on the honor system. In Assam, India, a blessing hut invites anyone to "take what you need, leave what you can." In Vancouver, a pay-what-you-want grocery store engages food surplus by offering up over 30 thousand kilograms of food monthly. A movement of community fridges are beaming out to residents in upstate New York and Philadelphia and Miami. In California, a mom started a pantry out of her front porch, while a Little Food Pantry in South Carolina feeds 950 people. In New York City, a woman who lost her job leads a pantry that feeds thousands.

The Joy of Giving is Contagious

Among the umpteen stories of giving we perused this year, one thing is clear: the joy of giving is a force that keeps on giving.

We were warmed by stories of people gifting homes to community members ranging from a donut shop employee to indigenous community. In the Big Apple, when residents of an apartment complex got news their building's kind-hearted cleaning lady of 20 years

got furloughed, they pooled funds to gift her two year's rent for the penthouse. In Indiana, when a pizza delivery man began having issues with his 28-year-old car, the community gifted him a new ride. Speaking of rides, in Chicago, a radio DJ repeatedly found himself driving past a young man and offered him a ride. Upon learning the 20-year-old walked 3 hours one-way to work everyday after his truck broke down, strangers collectively donated over \$8000 to repair his truck. In North Carolina, what began as one couple inviting a college-aged friend over for dinner blossomed into a tradition of offering home-cooked meals regularly for groups of 120 students for free -- simply for the joy of breaking bread together.

In Ontario, a friendly coffee drive-thru employee had to drop out of college due to financial constraints. He got a huge surprise when customers banded together to surprise him with tuition funds to send him back to school. On the topic of college students, a Harvard-bound high schooler paid-forward her \$40K scholarship to another student who could use it more. Business owners paid off student debt for 83 employees, as an 8-year-old sold keychains to pay off school lunch debt for his classmates families! On that note of debt, when medical oncologist Dr. Omar Atiq closed his clinic after nearly 30 years, he decided to erase the debt owed to him by 200 former patients. Always bothered by seeing patients struggle with illness and paying for their treatment, he remarked, "I just hope that it gave them a little sigh of relief and made it easier for them so they could face other challenges they may be facing in their lives." On a lighter note, in Rome, we also saw Pope Francis send 15 thousand ice creams to prisoners during one of Italy's hottest summers on record. And research offers more on the joy of giving.

When Disaster Strikes, Communities Unite

One resounding refrain we witnessed again and again in 2021, is the power of community to rise in the face of crisis or disaster.

Early in the year, when the usually balmy city of Houston, Texas faced unprecedented ice storms, plumbers drove from afar to help; a mattress store owner offered shelter to stranded strangers, and a couple took in their delivery driver for five days! Amid the tragic condo collapse in Surfside, Florida, volunteers (and even dogs!) wafted in from all corners in to respond with care and kindness. Amid New Orleans's Hurricane Ida, nurses voluntarily stayed through the night to shelter NICU babies, a music venue dished up meals for residents without power, and the same Houston mattress store owner sheltered storm victims once again, this time at his store in Louisiana, while also supplying truckloads of mattresses and other essentials. Amid tornadoes in Kentucky, nursing home aides shielded their elderly residents from debris while everyday citizens rallied together toys for the holidays. When floods in Malaysia displaced thousands and set a hundred-year record, people stepped up in all corners to provide relief, including a newlywed couple who offered up the feast of their canceled wedding banquet to flood victims.

Business and Work Goes Beyond the Bottom Line

2021 was witness to an array of changes in the landscape of how we work and do business.

Alongside inflation and waves of "Great Resignation", we witnessed multiple corporations and U.S. states boosting their minimum wage in spades: from Unilever to Costco to T-Mobile to Walgreens, and even an ice cream shop.

Moreover, research around wellbeing and mental health became commonplace, with companies in New Zealand, UK, Scotland, Iceland, Spain, Canada, Japan, and UAE experimenting with 4-day work weeks. With remote work becoming a mainstay in many fields, Portugal made it illegal for bosses to text employees after work hours. And a Japanese beverage maker hopes to boost employee camaraderie and morale by providing free vending beverage when two employees scan their ID cards at the same time.

Humanity also shined through across many businesses.

CEO of cosmetics retailer Lush gladly shut down multiple social media accounts (a move that's estimated to lose the company \$13.3 million) after whistleblowers revealed Facebook research on its negative affects to teen mental health. In Bunbury, Australia, construction of a water park was paused to let birds hatch after a pied oystercatchers nest was discovered on site. In California, when someone stole \$1000 from a Chinese restaurant during a power outage, the mountainside community raised five times the amount lost to give back to their beloved eatery. In the Netherlands, in response to 1.3 million people over 75 who report regularly feeling lonely, 200 Jumbo supermarkets are donning a new checkout option called "Kletska" ("Chat Checkout") to provide a space for isolated customers to have a leisurely conversation while purchasing groceries.

Sports Are About Much More Than Winning

This year also bore witness to some striking moments of humanity in the long-anticipated and one-year-delayed 2020 Olympics -- a reflection, perhaps, of the soaring spirit of sportsmanship among athletes today.

Among the highlights of the Tokyo Olympics, high jumpers, from Qatar and Italy, who are also friends, share the gold instead of opting for a jump-off. "This is beyond sport. This is the message we deliver to the young generation," Qatar's Mutaz Essa Barshim stated after co-winning one of the most competitive high jump finals in history. Polish javelin thrower auctioned off her silver medal to help an infant get heart surgery -- only to get it returned to her by the supermarket chain that purchased it and donated the funds for the baby's surgery. While British diver Tom Daley crocheted in the stands for a brain tumor charity in memory of his father, Jamaican hurdler Hansle Parchment thanked the volunteer who paid for his taxi to make it in time for his race. Another digest sums up the way a surfer jumped in to translate for the rival who beat him, two opposing runners helped each other to the finish line after falling, and competing athletes were spotted pep-talking and consoling each other.

Beyond the pros, everyday heroes inspired us with their shining acts of resilience, courage, and heart. After becoming legally blind following her battle with Covid, Laura Sosalla ran the Twin Cities marathon with four guide runners. In recreational hockey, a blind goaltender helped his team win 9-8. In high school sports, a deaf football team captured hearts with their historic, undefeated season heading into the California State Championships. When a teen runner collapsed in a cross-country race, a runner from the opposing team, stopped to help, forgoing his own chances of qualifying. In college sports, after winning a game for Wichita State University, one junior stayed behind to help janitors clean up the stands. And, after Michigan Wolverines football coach got a \$500K bonus for the Big Ten East title this year, he gave it to all the athletic department employees who took a pay cut at the start of the pandemic.

It was also a groundbreaking year for women in sports. At the Olympics, Sarah Gamal

-- became the first Arab and African female basketball referee. In January, Sarah Thomas became the first woman to officiate at the Super Bowl. In college American football, a female kicker is cheered on by her (all-male) teammates upon learning she won a surprise football scholarship. In hockey news, Taya Currie became the first female player drafted to the Ontario Hockey League. And at the New York Yankees baseball stadium, a 70-year-old woman became a bat girl sixty years after her request as a child was rejected via a letter from the team manager stating, "a young lady such as yourself would feel out of place in a dugout."

People Everywhere Welcome Strangers as Family

Despite pervasive polarities, there are still people everywhere greeting strangers as friends and family.

In Canada, a popular television show has brought over 50 politicians of different sides of the political spectrum together in "Political Blind Dates". Amid rocket fire on the streets near Gaza in May, Arab and Jewish hospital medics still worked in solidarity. When an Arab nurse, saw a Jewish man lying on the ground after being attacked by a mob, he immediately applied first aid, and brought him to the hospital. Far away, in Oklahoma, a teen who identifies as Jewish, brought \$80 to a local mosque, asking the imam to use it help Palestinians, with the message: "I want you to tell them this is from a young Jewish girl that worked all week babysitting. And that we love them and feel their pain."

Even in business transactions and everyday encounters, possibilities spark when tuned into the pulse of our interconnections.

When a long-haul Covid-19 patient fell behind on rent, his landlord, who is also a single mom, stepped up to help, stating simply, "He can't be evicted. He's sick. He would not be okay." In Ontario, Canada, a homeowner took the lowest bid on his home after learning of the family's story, and recalling strangers' acts of grace to him in hard times. "We don't know how life will treat us 10, 15, 20 years from now. So the best thing to do is to live it well today," he said. In Hawaii, a business owner hired the apologetic man who stole from him. In Belfast, Ireland, a bus driver took a detour to drop a woman at a senior care home so she could visit her mother. On what would have been her son's 35th birthday, one mother paid for a stranger's birthday cake. In Los Angeles, former chemotherapy patients write letters to offer solace to new patients who have to receive the treatment alone due to pandemic hospital precautions.

In France, a 15-year-old horse, Peyo, comforts cancer patients in the hospital halls. In Netherlands, a driver sacrificed his own car to save a driver having a seizure. On social media, a father shared about his autistic teen's wish for friends for his birthday; 55 thousand birthday wishes flooded in, and the post at one point was the number one trending topic on Twitter in the US. On Thanksgiving, a grandma's wrong-number text message carries on a 6-year-and-counting kinship and holiday tradition, and the story will even be depicted as a feature film. From wrong numbers, beautiful friendships can really blossom. Twenty years ago, Gladys Hankerson, now 80, misdialled her sister's number; a misstep that mushroomed into a heartwarming friendship with the then-youngster she had accidentally called, Mike Moffit, now 46. In Russia, firefighters block traffic to help an elderly woman cross the road. In New Zealand, a city closes the road to protect a sea lion and her pup -- for an entire month! During a freezing storm, a hotel welcomed anyone stranded, for free.

Innovating for the Planet is on the Rise

Countless stories this year have chronicled massive waves of energy to take care of our planet.

Among new innovations are a hospital ward in Taiwan made entirely from trash, solar-powered pavement in Hungary, and 3D-printed homes made of biodegradable materials in Italy. As you've likely heard, electric vehicles are gaining traction around the world. In Norway, 9 in 10 cars sold are electric or hybrid. In July, Germany reached its goal of 1 million electric cars on the road. In the U.S., five governors are building a shared network for charging electric vehicles. A new technology enables electric buses to charge wirelessly while resting, while an electric school bus powers the electric grid while kids are in school. This year, car manufacturers like Volkswagen, Fiat, Mercedes-Benz, and Ford announced near-future timelines to go all-electric in their product offerings by 2025 or 2030.

And individuals everywhere continue to do their part.

In Indonesia, a mobile librarian lends out books in exchange for recyclables. In Cornwall, UK, a league of "plastic-hunting pirates" have collected 50 tons of plastic from the ocean. In August, a 20-something year-old Dutch inventor launched a device named "Jenny" that removed nearly 20,000 pounds (9,000 kilograms) of plastic waste from the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. In India, communities have been converting food waste biogas into electricity and, in Nigeria, 14,000 plastic bottles can be packed with dirt and reused as bricks to make a home.

Never Doubt the Capacity of the Human Spirit to Make Lemonade from Lemons

As the saying goes, "When life gives you lemons, make lemonade." While 2021 can be said to have been slightly less shocking than 2020, we were witness to many striking moments of alchemy of the human spirit to brew up some remarkable lemonade.

In Lyon, France, an anonymous artist fills public potholes and cracks with stunning mosaics. In Thailand, high bouts of flooding prompted riverside restaurant guests to enjoy dining with the waves. In Australia, travel restrictions prevented Ben Jackson from attending his aunt's funeral, so -- with the help of a flock of sheep -- he bid farewell with a giant heart. Last Spring, when renowned cellist Yo-Yo Ma found himself waiting for the 15-minute observation period following his vaccine, he offered up a spontaneous performance that lifted the spirits of all in the clinic. In Finland, when bodies of water freeze over, architect-designer Pasi Widgren draws stirring pictures in the snow for all to enjoy for as long as it lasts. In Seattle, an artist setup a Free Little Art Gallery display outside her home to brighten her neighbors' days, as well as her own.

Amid pandemic lockdowns, idled taxis took on a second life in Thailand as rooftop gardens that could provide food to drivers and their families. In London, an ice cream man of over 40 years was bid adieu by a procession of ice cream trucks filling the air with the familiar jingle of ice cream trucks en route to the cemetery. In Melbourne, Australia, an intensive care nurse tracked down children's music group, The Wiggles, to inspire a young Covid-19 patient with Down syndrome to wear oxygen tubes to save her life. And as we wind down the holiday season, when a man learned his neighbor was going through hard times, he strung holiday lights from his house to hers, as a symbol of connection; soon the whole neighborhood was sparked with light, literally and metaphorically.

2021 reminded us how much is embedded in each moment's strength and weakness, certainty and lack of solidity, and ever-evolving arrangements of possibility. Thank you, for inspiring us with your everyday moments of choosing love over fear. As we enter 2022, may we continue to breathe into our shared tapestry of karuna.