

Kindness Journey: An Interview with Geoff Nedry by Richard Whittaker

I met Geoff Nedry in person a couple of years ago at a ServiceSpace retreat in Phoenix, AZ. I knew he was one of the ServiceSpace volunteers who did a lot of work for the KindSpring web portal. [formerly HelpOthers.org] It's a site where "Smile Cards" can be ordered. What is a smile card? In the following interview, this is explained. The cards are shipped at no fee to anyone who requests them. The cards are an encouragement to people to carry out random acts of kindness. Nothing is specified about what that means other than not passing up the small opportunities that are always presenting themselves, as in holding a door open for a stranger. People are encouraged to share stories about their acts of kindness on the site which now holds over four thousand such stories. The site is part of the larger ServiceSpace.org system that has several other web portals, each with a different function, but all connected in terms supporting forms of service.

I ran into Geoff again this year where I heard him telling a story about how his daughter Rachel had gotten involved in KindSpring. It was a story I wanted others to hear about and Geoff graciously agreed to share it.

Richard Whittaker: Maybe you could describe what KindSpring.org is about.

Geoff Nedry: Well, KindSpring is a web portal that's dedicated to acts of kindness, usually random acts of kindness. On the site there's the capability for any of the users to share the stories about any of the acts of kindness they may have done. And people can comment on the stories. You can also order smile cards, so you can actually leave a card when you do an act of kindness. It's really—it's almost like a kindness community.

RW: Okay, and what is a smile card? It's the size of a business card, right?

GN: Yes. It's pretty simple. On the front it just says, "Smile. You've been tagged." And in small print, it says, "Experiments in anonymous kindness is the name of the game—and now, you're it!" Then on the back there are a couple of lines, "Somebody reached out to you with an anonymous act of kindness and now it's your chance to do the same. Do something nice for someone. Leave this card behind and keep the spirit going!"

RW: How did you happen to get involved with KindSpring?

GN: I actually found it on a random web search back in 2006. It was December, you know, the holiday spirit kind of thing. I was looking for things I could do, acts of kindness. I think I typed in "random acts of kindness" and KindSpring popped up.

RW: What was motivating you to want to do an act of kindness?

GN: I've always done things here and there, but usually not for strangers. I don't remember if it was seeing some of the holiday shows where people are being kind, but I just really had an urge to do something and had my computer was handy, so I thought I would see if I could find some resources. And that's when I found it.

RW: You just had an urge to do something nice for somebody, a stranger?

GN: Yes.

RW: That's beautiful. And that's how you ran across KindSpring?

GN: Yes. And I started looking around the site, reading some of the stories. There are a lot of great inspirational stories where people have shared things they've done. And for the first few weeks I just kind of watched and read the stories. I didn't really participate and start adding my own stories or comments for a while. I was just trying to get a feel for what KindSpring.org was.

RW: And then what?

GN: After a little while I started commenting on some of the stories. And I got some great ideas from different people posting about things they'd done. Then I ordered some smile cards! I got my smile cards and actually went and purposefully went out there to do an act of kindness. I think the first thing I did was buying someone's meal behind me at a drive through, and I left them a smile card. Then I came started sharing stories on the web site and commenting more. It was a great. It's always been a really nice kindness community, a great place not just to share stories, but to support some folks on their kindness journeys. And really, it's motivated me to do and be more. So it's been a great experience for me.

RW: Tell me one or two of your earlier experiences, a couple of stories that made the biggest impression on you.

GN: One of the first ones that touched me the deepest, I think, was I found another website where people would ask for help and things like that. There was a woman who shared a story about how she was a recovering alcoholic. She had just started going through detox and things like that. And she was, "Boy, I could really use some support or anything out there." So I thought this is a great opportunity for an act of kindness. I went and bought a book, something like To Help Those Recovering From Alcoholism, and I put together a care package for her. It also included a little stuffed animal and a couple of smile cards. And I wrote her a nice letter to say I was very proud of her. It wasn't as anonymous as I wanted to be, but she only knows me as a screen name on that site. But the response she shared with me really taught me a wonderful lesson. Her response was, "I cannot believe a stranger took the time to not only put some things together for me, but write me one of the kindest notes I have ever received. And I will keep forever. And you've really motivated me to stay on this track. And I feel really good about it. And thank you ever so much. You've completely changed things for me." When she shared that with me, it really was a great reminder for me that you just never know when you do something just how much it can mean to somebody else. It was a great experience for me.

RW: That's wonderful. Of course I've read several of the stories on KindSpring.org and many of them are so deeply touching. They come from simple acts of kindness that don't necessarily require a lot of time or money, just a human response right there on the spot.

GN: Yes, absolutely. One of my favorite things about KindSpring is it's all about the small. People talk about how if they win the lottery they can help so many people. You hear that all the time. But if you start actually doing small acts and if you're fortunate enough to catch someone's response like I did with that woman, it really is a great way to see the human connection and how little things really do matter.—even if it's just a compliment or a smile. It doesn't necessarily have to do with money. A lot of times it's something anybody could do. That's one of my favorite things about that site. It is all about the small and how actually the small is pretty big.

RW: Yes. Now you have some children.

GN: I have two—my daughter, Rachel, and my son, Alexander. Rachel is nine and he is eleven.

RW: A few weeks ago I heard you tell a little story about how Rachel got interested in smile cards. Would talk about that?

GN: Sure. About a year after I joined KindSpring, I volunteered to start shipping smile cards. What that entails is they send you supplies and when people request smile cards just like I did, you mail them out 10 cards in an envelope.

RW: Now nobody charges for this?

GN: All you have to do is ask and we send them out to you. So I started doing that. When I got my supplies, I would stuff a lot of the envelopes. I used to sit on my bed while I was watching TV and get them all ready so that once I got orders from folks, I could just address them and they could go out the next day. So my daughter, she was five years old at the time, she came in and asked, "What are you doing?" So I told her I was putting together smile cards for people and sending them off to whoever sends me a note that they wanted some. And she's like, "Can I help?" So I had her count up the cards and put them in the envelopes. It gave me a great chance as a father to explain what the card was and what it was intended to do. So it was a great opportunity for me to teach my daughter about kindness and it was a fun little father-daughter thing we could do together.

RW: So she was putting the cards in the envelopes?

GN: She was. And the biggest thing for her was putting a smile sticker on the back of each envelope before we sent it. She loved doing that, too. And she kept asking me more and more questions about it.

Now whenever somebody orders smile cards sometimes they'll give us a comment on how they plan to use them. So as we were addressing an envelope to a particular person, I would say, okay, this person is going to use her smile cards at the grocery store. Or this person is going to give them away with flowers or balloons, or things like that. So she got to hear some of the stories from what people wrote in about how they were actually going to use the cards. So that's how she got started.

RW: So say more about how it evolved.

GN: Well after we'd done this for maybe six months, she asked me if I ever used smile cards. I said, "Absolutely." I told her that sometimes I would think something up intentionally and sometimes I'd wait for an opportunity to come up. She said, "I want to help. I want to do something." I said, "Okay, great." So the first thing we did was we put some envelopes together. Inside of each envelope we put a couple of smile cards, a few dollars and a nice quote, something simple like, "We hope this makes you smile and have a great day." She got to write the note herself, and then we put it in an envelope.

The first time we went to the grocery store. We thought okay, what we'll do is we will just randomly walk around and put them in people's carts, or even hand them to them—if she wanted to do that.

RW: So you were going to approach strangers and give them this envelope.

GN: Yes. And the envelope had a big smiley sticker on it that said, "Please open me. It is a gift for you." The idea was that hopefully people would feel comfortable opening it. So we went into the grocery store and started doing that. My daughter was six years old.

RW: Right.

GN: And it wasn't going so well. You know, people just aren't accustomed to strangers walking up to them. The first couple of times we handed someone the envelope. And they would reluctantly take it. Some would say, "Oh no. Thank you." You could see they were almost always uncomfortable.

RW: Right, because we're all conditioned to there being some hidden agenda.

GN: Right. Very much so. So I could see it wasn't going very well and I didn't want her first experience with smile cards to not be a really good experience. So we modified it. When somebody was not paying attention, we would try to sneak the envelope into their cart. And that was okay, but like I said, I could tell it was tough for the people. And I didn't want it to be a bad experience for Rachel.

RW: Right. So you kind of rethought this, didn't you?

GN: We did. And that's one of the great things about smile cards. The more you use them, the more you start figuring out what works and what doesn't work. So there is never a failure; there are just learning opportunities sometimes, like what we had at the grocery store when it didn't work so well.

RW: So what was the next step in this process?

GN: So the next thing we did was similar with the envelopes, but this time we went to one of the local malls here in Phoenix. Since we discovered that people weren't comfortable with us approaching them, we would just leave the envelopes on a table or a chair somewhere for someone to find. That's what we started doing. We found some areas where there were a lot of little tables and chairs. We would sit down, put the envelopes next to us and then get up and leave and try to make sure nobody saw. And Rachel absolutely loved it. She thought it was so much fun to be so sneaky. Whenever we set one on a table we did it very discreetly so nobody would see us do it. Because the whole point in our adventure was we wanted to be anonymous. And we just had the best time.

RW: Did you watch to see what would happen?

GN: Yes. It was a two-level mall with an area that had all these seats and tables. We dropped off four or five envelopes in that little area. Then we went up to the level above. Rachel's favorite thing was watching to see if somebody would find the envelope. When they did, she would get so excited. For instance, there was a woman pushing a stroller with a child asleep and she sat down just to take a break. It looked like she was tired. And then she found our envelope.

We were watching from above trying to be discreet like we weren't watching, but my six-year-old daughter, she's not exactly as discreet as she needs to be. She was too excited and just couldn't wait to see what happened. So we saw this woman; she opened the envelope, read the note and started looking around, smiling, trying to see if she could catch who dropped it off, looking around to see if this was for real. There was this smile on her face and her excited reaction was fantastic. Then her husband walked up and we watched her show it to him, show him the whole thing. And my daughter was hooked right there.

RW: That's great.

GN: It was great. She loved it. It was a great experience, just what I would want.

RW: Yes. Now I think it continued beyond that, right?

GN: It did. We kept doing things. Sometimes it would be the envelopes at the mall. That was one of her favorites. We would try to mix it up. She is nine now and she and I have a father-daughter date once a month. We go out and do something and we always take some smile cards with us and we do some kindness activity as well.

RW: How wonderful.

GN: Most recently we went out to dinner and we picked a couple in the restaurant to buy their dinner. I let Rachel pick them. It was an older couple sitting right behind us. We told the waiter what we were doing and gave him one of the smile cards. We paid their bill and they got a smile card. We didn't get to see their reaction, but this is a regular part of what we do every month and Rachel is part of the decision process, too, in regards to what we're going to do.

It's been a great learning experience for her. And she's taken smile cards to her school, too. In her third grade she had to do a project around something she thought was "super cool" about herself. That was the exact name of the project. The teacher set up a big poster board with all the things the kids did that they thought were cool. Rachel brought in a smile card and wrote a story about what she and I do in our little smile card adventures. We gave her an extra stack, so she took cards in to give to all the students. It was great reading from a little girl's perspective, "Here's what a smile card is and here is what I do with them."

RW: Yes.

GN: It was a fantastic thing! To see her not only having fun doing all the stuff that we do, but to really understand everything behind these random acts of kindness. To see this ingrained in her heart at such a young age makes me just super happy for how she is going to be out in the world when she gets older.

RW: That's very touching that you've taken such care and time to nurture this natural human impulse that we probably don't nurture enough in this society.

GN: Yes. It makes me very proud when I see things and hear different stories, because she's gotten a couple of awards. One of them was around kindness at her school. The teacher wrote a paragraph or two and read it to the whole school about why Rachel was the right person for the award.

RW: How did it go over with her class, when she introduced smile cards and this whole idea?

GN: It went great. She was fortunate with her teacher, too. She even had a banner hanging in her classroom saying "there is no such thing as a small act of kindness."

RW: How did the teacher have this banner? Did that come out of the smile cards or was this something the teacher had done on her own?

GN: No, the teacher had done it on her own. So when Rachel started talking about smile cards, I mean the teacher was all over it! She absolutely loved the idea! It was just a great coincidence.

RW: That is a wonderful coincidence. Now your son, has he picked up on any of this?

GN: Not as much. But I've noticed that he's on a different pace. He's kind of embracing it in his own way.

RW: When I first heard your story a week or two ago I was struck by how you are as a father. You're not forcing these things on your kids, but you're sensitive when there's an interest. I was really touched by the way you take time to respond to your children's interests.

GN: Yes. And, like in the grocery store example, if I try to force something on them, they wouldn't necessarily get the whole premise behind it, which—with the smile card stuff—is great. I think it's with the thought and the action behind it where the magic happens. So you're right, Richard. I really try to see if there's an interest, and if there is, I will absolutely help feed that and start pushing your comfort zone a little, once you get there. But I want you to feel comfortable first, and that's what my daughter has done. Now we've done dozens and dozens of different things. If I just say, "Hey, let's do one of our smile card things," it's not even a question. It's like, absolutely!

And my son will get there, too. But you're right, not pushing it, because I don't want it to be a negative experience. They'll naturally gravitate towards it. I've seen that. And sometimes that process is faster, and sometimes it's a little slower.

RW: If you don't mind sharing, what are some of the other things you think are important for helping kids grow in a healthy way?

GN: Well, a couple of things. First is to lead by example. That's one of the benefits of the smile card adventures we do. It's something we go do together. And if she's not comfortable, she sits in the background. When we first did that at the mall, my daughter was, "You go first dad." I'm like, "Okay, no problem."

I think that's really a mantra: lead by example. Then there are little teaching opportunities all over the place. So we always have a discussion—how is your day going? Things like that. Sometimes there have been some great stories, and we're very good about being supportive of all of the positive things that happen in life.

RW: So every day you find time to ask each of your children how their day was?

GN: Every single day.

RW: Wow. That's really a good thing.

GN: When I come home from work, it's actually one of the highlights of my day. You get the little kid perspective. "Oh, it was good! I played a lot at recess and I did my homework. It was a great day!" You know? —things like that.

And sometimes there are great opportunities there. "Well, you know, I got into an argument with my friend today."

"Oh really? What happened?"

You let them tell the story. And you ask, "What did you do? How did that go?" You know, just little things. It gives you a chance to help them so the next time they can maybe handle it a little bit different: "Well maybe next time if you said 'please' or did something different..." Just taking the time to ask and to share that really helps with building a good foundation. And hopefully, as they get older when you get into those tougher years, we've already built a strong foundation of good communication. I think that's really where a lot of it starts.

RW: Do you all have the chance to eat together at dinnertime?

GN: About 50-50. Sometimes we're getting ready for baseball practice, or something like that.

RW: Do you have any sort of thoughts about how much television or computer games? Is that something you've thought about?

GN: Yes. There are so many electronic options out there. I mean we've got iPads, computers; they've got a game system and TV. We absolutely put some parameters around it, especially now since it's summer. They're out of school. So we absolutely put some limits on that.

RW: So Rachel is nine years old now and I take it she's an integral part of the smile card production line.

GN: She is. She actually helps me with a lot of stuff. When I go to the web site, I read a lot of stories and there's an area where people can put up kindness updates like, "Hey, today I held the door open for somebody." Whatever small thing they want to mention. And there's an option there where you can add smiles. You can add up to four smiles for each update. So one of the fun things that she and I do together is we read the updates. Then she decides how many smiles we give it.

It's like, "Okay, Richard held the door for strangers today. Oh great, how many smiles shall we give him?" "Let's give him four smiles!" "That's a good idea." Stuff like that.

So we get to read the stories and read the updates, which is always great. Then she gets to participate and actually add some of the smiles. So we have a lot of fun with that.

RW: Of course, she's learning how to read, too.

GN: She is. And it's stuff she can relate to. It's not like somebody had to think up a big production. One was about a kid giving some balloons away. She's like, "I want to do that!" So we bought some balloons and stood out in front of the grocery store and handed them to little kids that came out, "Here's a balloon for you." And each one got a smile card. It's simple and it's very kid friendly. We love it. I love it.

RW: Now recently you had some unexpected guests show up from the KindSpring.org community. And this is a community that's open to everybody, right? Nobody has to pay a fee to become a member.

GN: No, that's correct. It's an online community of kindness.

RW: So you know a lot of people through the online portal. You're meeting people all the time, right?

GN: Only in the last year or so. Some of the ServiceSpace.org folks I met for the first time in person last year. I came to this whole thing online and everybody I interact with, so to speak, has been online.

RW: But you meet people online?

GN: Yes. But we all have our screen names. Mine is "Make Someone Smile."

RW: So through repeated online connections, you began to feel more connected to certain people, even if it's just through screen names.

GN: Yes. Very much so. I've been a part of KindSpring.org for almost seven years now. For two or three years there was a core group of seven or eight people I used to see around on the site all the time posting stories and comments. You can just really tell that these are good people. And everybody there is great.

So as I moved into a couple of other online areas like FaceBook, a couple of them said, "Hey, I want to be your Facebook friend." I'm like, "Okay." So now I can put a face to what is actually the screen name of some of them I had never met. So I've got a handful of friends through KindSpring that, up until this year, I had never met.

So earlier this year one of the people had messaged me and said, "Hey, I would like to come and visit you." It was one of the people I had met on KindSpring.org. I'm like, wow! I'm in Arizona. And he's from Oman.

RW: So this is the crossover from online to meet in person.

GN: It is. Which is typically, especially in this day and age, a pretty big leap of faith.

RW: Yes.

GN: This is somebody I had never even talked to on the phone. So after a year of seeing Facebook posts and things like that, when he messaged me and said, "Hey, I want to come see you, because I am going to be in the U.S. and I would love see you for a couple of days in Arizona." I'm like, "Absolutely! You're welcome to stay with me." I just kind of put it out there, "We'd love to meet you."

And then he said, "Great. How about next week?"

I'm like, "Uh, okay great." You know?

Then the woman he was staying with is also another KindSpring friend. She messages me and says, "Hey, do you have room for one more?"

I'm like, "Absolutely. I always have room for friends!"

So they both came out in January with the sole purpose just to meet me, which was phenomenal. It was very humbling and it helped me. It was a crossover. It brought them into the real world where I got to meet them. So they were here for a couple of days—and the absolute, nicest people I've ever met. Truly, you know. They were absolutely just as

kind and genuine in person as they were online. It was an absolutely phenomenal experience.

RW: Now there's an interesting added factor, right? Islam.

GN: Yes. The gentleman from Oman is Muslim.

RW: And you're from a traditional Christian background, right?

GN: Yes. And my wife is, also. And my wife loves to ask questions. She's a very curious person. Her family has not been very open to other faiths or religions and certainly not as open to new ideas or other perspectives as we are.

RW: So here's a situation where there's a certain amount of fear and mistrust of Muslims, especially given that the atmosphere we've had for the last 10 or 15 years.

GN: Yes. When they found out that he was coming to stay with us, they thought we were crazy. So it was like, "You're going to let some Arab guy come and stay in your home and you don't even know him? You know, they don't like Americans." And all of this stuff.

RW: Right. So how did that all play out?

GN: It was very interesting. Like I mentioned, my wife is a very curious person. So with the gentleman, she flat out asked, "I don't know anything about Islam. Would you mind if I ask you some questions?"

He's like, "Not at all. I'm happy to explain or clarify anything you want." So she spent a good forty five minutes to an hour peppering him with questions about Islam and the Koran and what he believed and just everything. It was a very interesting. The end result was that we found a lot of common ground between some of the beliefs in Islam and what we have with some of our Christian beliefs. And that's something you don't hear about in the news or read about it in the papers. It was a great eye-opening experience for her and me as well.

RW: That's a wonderful story to share. And did any of that filter back to your wife's mother?

GN: It did, and this is my favorite part. The next day my wife was talking to a couple of different members of her family. And they were like, "Oh my gosh, how did that go?" It was great to listen to how my wife was talking to her family: "Hey, you know what? You had it all wrong. There are a lot of things that they believe that are just like what we believe. And he was the nicest guy." She even quoted a line of the Koran that he had told her about. I'm paraphrasing, "If you love one person, you love everyone. If you kill one person, you've killed everyone." And it was great to watch her being such an advocate for tolerance in the world. To say hey, "You don't understand. He's the nicest guy. There are a lot of common things there." Just to watch that whole exchange. It was a great experience to both witness and be a part of.

RW: That's beautiful. And ultimately stories like this one where strangers can meet across cultural backgrounds and find common ground can give us a little bit of hope. And all of this originally came from your impulse seven years ago to do an act of kindness for a stranger.

GN: Yes. If I look at my kindness journey, as I like to call it, I'm amazed at how far I've

come. The more I got involved with KindSpring doing acts of kindness, the more I wanted to do more. I was shipping smile cards and then shipping smile decks. Then I got more involved behind the scenes. And now I'm pretty active in the service-based environment from a parent organization perspective. When I look back and reflect on it, this has been an amazing journey thus far. I just look forward to continued growth. It's just hard for me to even describe it.

RW: Well, the whole idea of smile cards—do you know how old it is?

GN: I think it might have been started either in 2003 or 2004.

RW: I think it came out of a conversation that Nipun [Mehta] was having with his cousin, or something like that. They came up with a design and went to Kinko's to print up the very first order. The guy behind the counter was curious, "What are smile cards?" And when he explained it he said, "Well, I'm going to be the first one doing an act of kindness." And he did the whole job for free.

GN: That's right. I remember Nipun telling that story. And you see so many different things like that. Like I mentioned early on, there is never a charge. It's always a gift. Some people like to come back and donate, because it's like, "Oh my gosh!" And they want to pay it forward. People thought it was crazy to try and do that and not charge anybody. And here it is almost ten years later and it's still going strong. We've shipped a million-and-a-half smile cards, I think. They're out there floating around in the world connected with acts of kindness.

RW: Over 1.5 million. Amazing. But they can be printed off your own computer, too. Right?

GN: Yes. We actually have them available for download and you print them yourself or we will send them to you. The ones you can print yourself also come in a variety of different languages.

RW: So I mean, conservatively, there are probably over two million smile cards floating around the world, and it continues spreading.

GN: Yes, absolutely. It's pretty amazing when you think about the scope.

RW: Geoff, is there anything else you want to add?

GN: No. Like I said, I think the best part of it is to start small. If you just keep with it, before you know it, it changes your life. I've absolutely felt that myself personally and I couldn't be more thankful for that. So I am very glad years ago that I randomly stumbled across it and ended up becoming a part of it. I couldn't be happier.

For more information visit: <http://www.kindspring.org/>