

Compassion: Art and Character Education



Experiences such as gift giving connect to real life and offer the best lessons about compassion.

Pam Stephens

A famous British legend suggests that roundtable discussions began with King Arthur and his knights. Because of its shape, all who are seated around such a table have equal status. Likewise, those in education who participate in roundtable discussions have an equal voice. It is this equal voice that brings us to the topic of compassion.

The definition of compassion that I find most fitting states that the term means "Deep awareness of the suffering of another coupled with the wish to relieve it" (*American Heritage Dictionary*, 4th ed.). As we join around the table to consider ideas of compassion, let us consider how we

can teach this character trait to students. Indeed, it is one thing to know what compassion means, but it's quite another to *understand* what it means. The art classroom is an ideal conduit for developing the capacity for compassion within our students.

Haiti Houses

In the early weeks of January 2010, an earthquake struck Haiti. Unimaginable devastation made an already impoverished country that much worse. Among those to answer the call to assist Haiti were two Florida art teachers, Ann Ayers and Ellen McMillan. These two educators developed the now well-known Haiti Houses Project.

**Compassion, it seems,
is contagious.**

Through this compassionate project, students created small house-shaped pendants that were then sold to raise money for the rebuilding of Haiti and the care of Haitian citizens. The project quickly spread. Schools in the United States, Canada, and Australia became involved. I am proud to say that my art education students can be counted among those who contributed to the cause.

Teaming Up

My students became involved when they learned that Beck Elementary School in north Texas was participating. We quickly teamed with the art program at Beck, and before long, a domino effect occurred and the compassion of my art education students spread across our Arizona campus. Surprisingly, even non-art students asked to participate. Compassion, it seems, is contagious. At the end of the week, our campus groups had created dozens of houses that we then shipped to Beck Elementary where they were sold. More than a thousand dollars was raised and donated to Doctors without Borders.

As we begin a new academic year, let's join together at this nationwide round table to consider how we will be compassionate role models for students. Remember that experiences that connect to real life offer the strongest lessons. Please share your ideas so that we can all work towards a caring and sustainable global community. ☺

Pam Stephens is a member of the School-Arts advisory board and associate professor of art education at Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff. Pamela.Stephens@nau.edu

WEB LINK

www.haitihouses.org