



PHILANTHROPY

Meaning without Meanness

KINDNESS AND CIVIL DISCOURSE CAN GO A LONG WAY TOWARD RESOLVING CONFLICTS



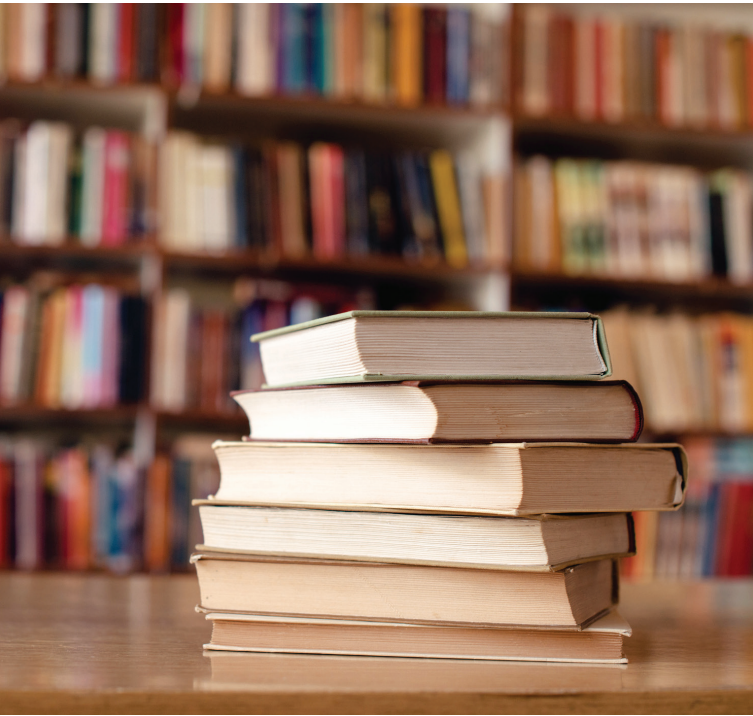
BY JEFFREY R. PICKERING

In the week following the heated August 28, 2023 meeting of the School Board of Indian River County, Chair Peggy Jones and other board and staff members of the School District of Indian River County reported receiving threatening communications. Most of these threats referenced the public com-

ment section of the meeting, in which dozens of speakers read passages from books that they said were too explicit for public school libraries.

Jones, like many elected officials across the country, is trying to navigate this challenging issue while presiding over public meetings that are broadcast in real time with

unknown audiences. Exercising her responsibility as chair, she asked some speakers to stop reading when they exceeded the allotted time. In other cases, she issued a content warning before proceeding, out of concern for parents who might be listening or watching remotely with young children. Ultimately, to comply



“The children and this work are too important.”

– PEGGY JONES

with a new Florida law, the meeting ended with a vote to remove all books that were determined to be unfit to be read aloud or that required a content warning.

Despite the outcome, a “win” for those advocating for these changes, a few seem to have felt compelled to engage in contentious behavior.

“Say what you mean. Mean what you say. Don’t say it mean.”

In his seminal work *Alice’s*

Adventures in Wonderland, with the patter between the Mad Hatter and Alice about the importance of word choice, Lewis Carroll inspired this aphorism, which serves me well in situations where my emotions get the best of me and threaten to disrupt civil discourse in both private and public conversations. Instead of a written set of rules or citizen input guidelines dictating how public comments are to be conducted at

our school board, city council, or county commission meetings, I wonder if prominently displaying this phrase or even teaching people how to do it could help.

If the momentary reverence for our flag, pledges for liberty and justice for all, or invocations at the start of public meetings aren’t working, perhaps a linguistic adventure to Wonderland might cause us to tap the brakes and think about the tone and impact of our words before we speak. Politeness and kindness can’t hurt, and there is science to support them as more effective tools for communicating and getting things done.

Becky A. Bailey, an award-

winning author and renowned teacher who has a PhD in early childhood education and developmental psychology, is an internationally recognized expert. A pioneer in social and emotional learning, Bailey created the company Conscious Discipline more than two decades ago to help families and educators become more resilient, more compassionate, and better equipped to handle whatever challenges, conflicts, or upsets life sends their way. It works because of its application of scientific research that encourages loving and kind communication, even in the most challenging circumstances with children who are



Peggy Jones is the chair of the School Board of Indian River County.

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INDIAN RIVER INSIGHTS



Positive communication with children helps them with problem-solving.

physically or verbally aggressive. These behaviors activate the parts of the brain that help people feel safe, connected, and capable of solving problems.

Over the years, Indian River Community Foundation has awarded grants to organizations like The Learning Alliance and Childcare Resources to provide professional development opportunities for teachers, early childhood educators, and parents to learn how to implement the principles of Conscious Discipline to promote social and emotional learning. Participants learn about the brain and how it works when threatened, disconnected, or confused. They also learn strength-based approaches to help children self-regulate and solve problems even in the most challenging circumstances. It has been transformational, resulting in increased academic proficiency and reduced disciplinary incidents in the schools where it has been implemented. Seeds of kindness have also been sown.

Peggy Jones understands the science behind helping students and their parents feel safe, connected, and capable of solving problems. Her knowledge comes from

decades of experience working in education as a teacher, principal, and administrator. When she was elected to the school board in 2020, she attributed the achievement to her 40-year role as an active member of the Vero Beach and Indian River County community and the connections she has made to others who love this community. She also understands that kindness can go a long way toward overcoming differences.

When I called her after reading the news about the threats, I expected to find someone in "survival mode," angry and ready to fight back. It's what our brains tell us to do. I was surprised, however, to observe her confidence in her role as a community leader and her commitment to figuring these big problems out with kindness and respect.

"Your support means the world to me," she said. "I've gotten a lot of support, and while I am concerned only because I am a mom and a grandmother, I'm not going anywhere. The children and this work are too important."

Grit, unyielding courage in the face of hardship or even danger, with a little kindness folded in: these are the ingredients that community

leaders are made of, and because of these I have faith in leaders like Jones.

When our children feel safe, they make connections with others, and they are empowered to solve problems and achieve their goals. While our public institutions are not perfect, I am hopeful that we can find a better, kinder, gentler way to convey differences of opinion or demands for improvement when things go wrong.

We set expectations of our school district leaders to meet the highest standards for safety, community, and excellence. If we truly want progress, however, we should afford them the same. But the one standard that is missing is perhaps the greatest: kindness. 🌟



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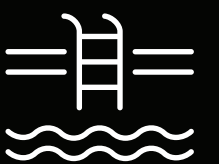
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