

**Being Mindful to Everyday Kindness: Untold Stories about Aaron Ripkowski and the
University of Oklahoma**

Elaine Hsieh

I have been teaching health communication for over a decade. Because of the success of the several health campaigns in our local communities, I requested funding from Sooner Parents to conduct health campaign for the homeless for a class in Fall, 2014. In particular, I plan to use homelessness as the applied contexts as I survey theories and topics of health communication. I wanted my students to be able to see how these theories can be explained and applied to real life issues. All students participated in literature search and organized research presentations, examining the various individual, sociocultural, and sociopolitical factors that contribute to the homelessness. We learned about the complexity and diversity of people who are homeless. As part of the course requirements, we had a field trip. Each student conducted a semi-structured interview with a person who relied on a local homeless shelter for everyday resources. Each participant receives a \$10 Walmart gift card.

The undergraduate students spent time talking to a homeless person, asking questions about their life experiences and life histories. More importantly, they asked what the homeless person would like to teach them about homeless, life, and themselves. It was a great success. The students cannot wait to share their experiences and conversations with their friends and family members. They had lots of great ideas to execute a health campaign that meets the needs of the homeless.

November, 2014, three months after the optimistic start of the class, was a stressful time for everyone, including myself. All students have completed their individual interviews. Group projects were under way. Students visited me almost daily. The stress of actually doing

something as a team was getting to everyone. Logistics and lack of resources were manageable problems as long as we can come up with creative solutions. Being flexible and adaptive to changes in group dynamics, less so. Working with team members who never shows up to group meetings? No one has a good answer. Everyone was feeling physically and emotionally drained.

Then, one day, Aaron Ripkowski sent me a thank you note and forwarded an email to me.

-----Original Message-----

From: Ripkowski, Aaron R.
Sent: Saturday, November 22, 2014 10:02 AM
To: Hsieh, Elaine
Subject: FW: Thank you

Professor Hsieh,

I am forwarding you the thank you letter I received for spending time with the homeless man that was a direct result of the field work that was assigned in our class. I wanted to thank you for the opportunity that opened my eyes to the stereotypes and stigmas of the homeless. Spending time with this man has had an impact on my life that will stick with me forever. It taught me a valuable lesson and I just wanted to thank you for the opportunity. I realize that you may or may not have wanted me to deviate from the initial plan of just interviewing the individual but I was thinking that since the man could not walk too well, I would take him to the store to redeem his gift card; so I did so. I apologize if we were not supposed to take any further action but I could not help but try and do a little more.

Also, on my transcript that I am writing up for the wrapping up of the field work I would like to warn you and explicitly state my reasons for a comment I made on the recording. At one point in the interview I asked a certain question that made the man begin to slightly cry and my initial instinct was to say, "I know some of these questions are dumb and I am sorry." I did not know what to say to comfort him so the words just came out. I assure you that was not what I meant but instead what I was trying to get across was an apology for the questions touching a rough area to the individual. I apologize if I in any way shape or form offended you or somehow flawed the data that I collected.

Thank you!

Aaron Ripkowski

From: Divine, Connie L.
Sent: Friday, November 21, 2014 11:04 AM
To: Ripkowski, Aaron R.
Subject: Thank you

Aaron,

I just wanted to share a conversation I had with a homeless man last Sunday who you made quite an impression on.

Some elementary kids in our church decided they wanted to make breakfast burritos for the homeless every Sunday. So since summer several of us meet at 6:30 am at our church (Generations Church on Boyd and Wylie) and we make 60-80 burritos and take them to the Salvation Army and to Food and Shelter for Friends.

Last Sunday while serving burritos at Food for Friends I had the privilege of having a conversation with an older gentleman who was very impressed by you. As he tells the story, you asked him if you could survey him for a class. You gave him a gift certificate and even took him to redeem it. As we were talking, he stood up reached into his pocket, and with tears coming down his eyes, he pulled out a necklace with a cross on it. He said, "Aaron gave me this and I will treasure it always." I was blown away. Something that you probably thought was insignificant at the time has left a lasting impression of the gentleman.

I personally just wanted to thank you for not only what you do on the field, but the difference you make in the lives of others off the field. As an OU graduate and employee for over 34 years, I could not have been more proud. I know you guys do a lot off the field that you do not want recognition for, but I want you to know you do make a difference in the lives of others.

I have not missed a home game and only a very few Texas games since 1971 when I started at OU, and I'm always proud of the Sooners, win or lose! My husband and I were there to witness that fantastic Sugar Bowl last year. What a thrill! And I don't know if your ears were burning or not, but my new friend at Food and Shelter for Friends, enjoyed talking about your touchdown last week. Good Luck to you this weekend.

Sorry to take so much of your time. Make it a great week!

Connie Divine

Neither Aaron nor I knew who Connie was. She did not provide any organizational title. The email content suggested that she is an avid OU football fan and a long-time OU employee. The fact that she used an OU email account and wrote to Aaron directly suggests that she has access to OU directory. But that was it. It was not until I did a Google search did I realize that Connie, an OU retiree according to the OU directory, was a highly praised and respected academic advisor. She has garnered some of the top honors as an academic advisor, including the 2001 Oklahoma Academic Advising Association Outstanding Adviser Award and the 2013 OU Provost's Outstanding Academic Advising Award (Kelly-Houston, 2001; University College,

2015). But this fact was unknown to us when Aaron and I marveled at the serendipity of the series of events.

I remember the participant I recruited for Aaron's interview well. It was a sunny morning. He sat against the shaded wall of the Shelter, staying away from the crowds. "Maybe he wanted to be left alone," I thought. I quickly brushed off my thought, justifying my intrusion – I needed to recruit participants for my students' interviews. As I introduced myself and the group of students who followed me around in search of their participants, he looked up and muttered softly. I couldn't understand what he said. I thought that he may have had a stroke or may be drunk or high, I was not sure. Realizing that I did not understand what he said, he raised his voice and uttered some muffled words again. I felt embarrassed. In front of my students, I felt uncertain about my authority as a faculty member. I was not sure if I should give up recruiting this participant because I could not understand a word he said or blame him for his lack of clear diction. All of a sudden, a female student's eyes lit up, "Oh, you want to know about the volleyball game schedule!" "Yes!" OU Volleyball team was having a very good season, he wanted to know if we had any inside scope. My students were apologetic but quickly took their chance to ask if he could be their interviewee. "Why not," he shrugged his shoulders. I quickly offered him a \$10 gift card for his participation.

Still, I was not sure if he was drunk or high, had a hangover, had a stroke, or just did not have the energy to talk clearly or at least audibly. He talked so slowly, with a sluggish tone and mumbled words. I know I should not be thinking about the stereotypes of the homeless but my students' safety was my priority. I was not comfortable with leaving him to a female student despite the fact that the interview will be conducted outdoor and I'd be around. So, I simply grabbed the biggest guy in my student group to be the interviewer. As I pushed Aaron forward, I

lightheartedly said, “I’m really sorry that we do not have a volleyball player here. But we have another student athlete, Aaron Ripkowski. I hope he’s okay.” “Hey, there’s an OU football player whose name is also Aaron Ripkowski,” he looked up and his eyes widened. “You! Are you that Aaron Ripkowski?” He asked in an almost whispering, shaky voice. Aaron gave a big smile, “Yes, sir. I am.” “I’m Ray. Men, they totally did you wrong on that call last game,” referencing the OU-Kansas State game in which Aaron was ejected for targeting (Kersey, 2014). As I left Aaron, I told him to lower his posture, sat next to the participant, and be very patient to the slow pace of the participant’s talk. “Do not rush your interviews,” I said quietly. By this time, Ray was engaged and excited. He was ready to talk. As I left them, I worried that the whole interview would be about Aaron, not the interviewee.

At some point, I noticed Aaron and Ray were walking away from where they were sitting. I did not think much. Maybe they were stretching their legs. I did not realize that Aaron had volunteered to drive him to a store. Aaron’s interview was like any other students’ interviews. Nothing stood out in particular. He never mentioned about giving the cross he wore on his neck to his interviewee even during our debriefing sessions in class. No one would ever know about this, other than Ray.

I read Connie’s letter to Aaron and Aaron’s letter to me repeatedly. I felt proud. More than that, I felt encouraged, empowered, and revitalized. I was startled by the power of Connie’s words on me. She did not even know I existed. She was not writing to me. Yet, I felt that all the struggles with daily nuances and frustrations in coordinating and leading three complex projects for a 3-credit hour undergraduate class was a small price for all the rewards to be gained. Though living in the same community, and maybe even seeing each other all the time as we walk pass one another, I could not have imagined that our lives are connected so tightly. But we were. And

all this started because of Aaron's random acts of kindness. Without prompting, he sensed his participant's needs, offering a ride and a heartfelt memento. Ray recognized it immediately and vowed to cherish it for life.

Connie's kindness was equally touching. She was already being a great role model for our community, working with elementary kids to prepare breakfast for the homeless. She did not have to let Aaron know about her recent encounter. But she was proud to be a Sooner. Aaron's act energized her, finding the goodness of her community and taking pride in the collective identity of a Sooner. She was touched by Aaron's kindness and his uplifting message to the homeless person. She did not have to write the thank you note, but she did. Maybe that was the reason why she has received so many awards as an academic advisor. She celebrates others' success and provides the needed courage and energy for their adventures. What an amazing and generous gift Connie has offered to Aaron, and Aaron to me. What a blessing for this young adult to know and to learn about his influences on others. I was deeply moved. I wrote back to Aaron.

-----Original Message-----

From: Hsieh, Elaine

Sent: Monday, November 24, 2014 9:26 AM

To: Ripkowski, Aaron R.

Subject: RE: Thank you

Aaron,

Thank you for the wonderful letter. This is probably one of the most rewarding and satisfying things I have received as a teacher.

Most of the time, we don't know the changes we have made in others' lives. How wonderful it is that Connie shared her experience with you, letting you know that you have made a person's life much better. Homelessness probably will continue to be a struggle in his life. But because of you, he knows he is not alone. He knows that you understood his suffering. You transformed his life. In the process, Connie's life was transformed and so was yours. I am grateful that you shared the stories and emails with me because you allowed me to be part of the ripples, learning the effects of my "ambitious" plan of having you guys to meet a homeless person and just chat. Thank you.

You are in a position to inspire many and you can touch and motivate people in ways that few others can. I still vividly remember when we recruited your guy, how excited he was to learn that you are going to talk to him. I hope you continue to use your gift and power to make the world a better place.

As for your comment, no worries. I said that during my interviews all the time, even though I designed the questions. I always find it a privilege when people are willing to share their lives with me.

Sometimes, there's nothing we can do when seeing other people going through some of the worst times of their lives. However, I tend to think that letting them know that their suffering has a witness is the best gift we can offer. They are not alone. Their suffering is not unheard. Because you are there.

Sincerely and warmly,

Elaine

Feeling inspired by Connie's act of kindness, I decided to write a letter to Aaron's coach.

Not surprisingly, a search of "Stoops" at OU directory did not provide an email for Bob Stoops.

But Mike Stoops was there. "Well, I did my best," I thought and sent out the email.

-----Original Message-----

From: Hsieh, Elaine

Sent: Monday, November 24, 2014 12:14 PM

To: Stoops, Mike J.

Subject: FW: Thank you

Dear Coach Stoops,

I just received a letter from Aaron Ripkowski. I am very touched and grateful for Aaron's generosity in sharing this transformative experience with me. Please be sure to read the letter forwarded to me as well.

I am impressed with Aaron's willingness to go beyond what is expected of him and just do good in our community.

I hope that you can find some ways to tell him that he has been a great influence in our community and a great representative for the OU football team.

Warmly,

Elaine

I wondered if my email would have provided the positive momentum as others' thank you notes. I waited a few days, nothing happened. Life moved on. Then, one day Aaron sent me the following email.

-----Original Message-----

From: Ripkowski, Aaron R.
Sent: Friday, December 05, 2014 10:38 AM
To: Hsieh, Elaine
Subject: RE: COMM-4413-001 - Issues in Health Communication

Dr Hsieh,

I was informed yesterday that I would be receiving the Don Key award and I believe it has a lot to do with and thanks to your class and the opportunity to speak to the homeless man I interviewed.

One of my academic advisors forwarded the thank you letter to the coaching staff around the same time that they were voting on the award. I know that there are a lot more deserving players on my team than I, but I am honored to accept it and figured I should let you know the impact that the field work has had on my life.

Coach Stoops read the letter to my entire team and I believe it may have some impact on the views of my teammates. I was only doing what was assigned to me by you and feel somewhat guilty for the praise that it has brought me. You are an incredible human and hope that all over your future campaigns are successful beyond your dreams.

P.S. Technically I am not supposed to know about the award yet because Don Key has the right to announce the award at the opening ceremonies of the game Saturday so could you keep it a secret until then?

Thank you,

Aaron Ripkowski

On December 6, Aaron was awarded the 2014 Kon Key Award prior to Saturday's Senior Day game vs. Oklahoma State. According to the OU website (Sooner Sports, 2014),

Don Key was a three-year starter for the Sooners, an All-Big 8 guard and potential All-American until cancer surgery ended his football career in 1981. Barry Switzer established the Don Key Award in 1982.

Oklahoma coaches describe the award as the highest honor an OU football player can receive while playing for the Sooners. It goes to the player who best exemplifies the many superior qualities of Key, both on the field and in the classroom.

For now, this marks the end of a series of chain emails and thank you notes. I am amazed by how easily one can reach out to a complete stranger yet provide such a powerful and energizing impact on each other's life. I felt strongly to share the stories of their acts of kindness.

When I asked if I could share their emails, both Aaron and Connie were tremendously supportive and gracious. Neither of them performed these acts of kindness or crafted the emails thinking that it'd appear in a book one day. They did it because it seemed right at the moment.

This story is not just about Aaron's or Connie's acts of kindness, however. It is also about how we respond to others' acts of kindness. Ray's heartfelt gratitude was the catalyst that prompted Connie's email. It takes mindfulness to notice others' acts of kindness. Ray's was deeply appreciative of Aaron's gift of a cross, a necklace that he wore daily, even during his game days. This is a gift that is full of symbolic meanings. When we are mindful, we are able to see the world in its richest color. When we are mindful, it's hard not to care. We become invested – in ourselves, in each other, and in our communities.

“Paying it forward (PIF)” has now become a social movement, encouraging individuals to provide random acts of kindness to others (Cobb, 2015). A recent study found that both receivers and givers of random acts of kindness experience positive benefits to their well-being, noting that “PIF givers reported increased overall PA [positive affect], optimism, gratitude, life satisfaction, and joviality, with the largest changes found in PA and joviality” (Pressman, Kraft, & Cross, 2014, p. 6). In addition, in addition to experiences of positive mood, receivers of acts of kindness often demonstrate desire and behaviors of paying the kindness forward (Pressman et al., 2014), a proliferating, upward-and-forward effect of good will that has also been observed by other studies on PIF, altruism, and generosity (Chang, Lin, & Chen, 2012; Dass-Brailsford, Thomley, & de Mendoza, 2011; Tsvetkova & Macy, 2014). These acts of kindness can spread through a social network, creating a compounding impact with increasing number of people choosing to “pay it forward” as they become inspired and revitalized by others' acts of kindness. The bottom line is that acts of kindness energizes the givers while inspires and revitalizes the

recipients to pass on the good will. It catches on. Researchers argued that groups with altruists will become more altruistic as a whole, resulting in higher likelihood of survival than selfish groups (Fowler & Christakis, 2010; Klein & Dollenmayer, 2014; van Doorn & Taborsky, 2012). Being mindful to others' acts of kindness may just be the key to provide the needed energy for us to create, support, and maintain the community that we love. It creates a community in which everyone can be seen, heard, and thrive.

References

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