

EDUCATION/HIGH SCHOOL

Greater Seattle ARK Is Powered by Kindness

Local youth-led organization promotes positivity through everyday acts of selflessness

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PHOTO: Greater Seattle ARK members welcome the community to chalk it up to kindness. Credit: Arthi Venkatesh

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In a bit of serendipity that borders on the poetic, [Greater Seattle Acts of Random Kindness](https://washington-acts-of-random-kindness-club.webnode.com/) (<https://washington-acts-of-random-kindness-club.webnode.com/>) ([@greaterseattleark](https://www.instagram.com/greaterseattleark/) (<https://www.instagram.com/greaterseattleark/>)) owes its existence to a coincidence and an act of kindness. Two years ago, Arthi Venkatesh and a friend stumbled upon social media recruitment for a club that practices acts of random kindness. Inspired by the idea, they applied to what they thought was the national chapter and discovered it was actually a small group of students who had organized a club in Northern California. Surprised and pleased that someone outside of their community was interested in the project, the original ARK leaders kindly taught the two Newport High School sophomores everything they needed to know to start their own ARK chapter in the Pacific Northwest.

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“It was so fun to see the impact of acts of kindness in our community, so I got involved on a larger scale,” says Venkatesh. Now a senior, Venkatesh is the copresident of the Greater Seattle Acts of Random Kindness council. Like the original group in California, Greater Seattle ARK helps students launch ARK clubs in more schools. Greater Seattle ARK also acts as a local council to unite ARK leaders from the five (and counting) participating high schools in the Puget Sound region.

“The council provides structures and ideas, and each club does their own thing in their community,” explains co-media chair Ayla Karmali, another Newport High senior. Though they may choose different activities, each group shares the same lofty mission: to spread joy in the community through kindness. But the activities themselves are usually simple.

“You don’t have to do a big act,” says ARK editor Catie Liu, also a senior at Newport. “It’s the little things that count. You can see how even the smallest things impact other people.”

Karmali says she could see the immediate impact of small things when the Newport club distributed stress-busting lollipops. “When we were giving out lollipops during finals, it was

cool to see the smiles when people received one. It brightened their day.”

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Even during remote learning, when the number of personal interactions went way down and people were stressed as if every week was finals week, ARK found ways to brighten days by focusing on events and activities that foster community. For one campaign, its members brought sidewalk chalk out to the parks. In that safe, outdoor environment, they invited their schools’ art clubs – and random passersby – to use the chalk to draw pictures and share positive messages. Liu adds that several schools also organized campaigns to send cards and letters of encouragement to first responders and other essential workers on the frontlines of the pandemic. Other pandemic-safe activities have included virtual movie nights and food drives as well as “giving tree” message boards (physical and [virtual \(https://padlet.com/greaterseattleark/iqn0aq67mac6icgh\)](https://padlet.com/greaterseattleark/iqn0aq67mac6icgh)) that encourage community members to share compliments and inspiration.

While individual schools have their own requirements for forming clubs, which may include charters, regular meetings or other specific commitments, ARK itself takes a softer approach. Once an ARK has met its school’s requirements, all it takes to join Greater Seattle ARK’s coalition is filling out a form on [the organization’s website \(https://washington-acts-of-random-kindness-club.webnode.com/start-a-club/\)](https://washington-acts-of-random-kindness-club.webnode.com/start-a-club/). There is no requirement for participation in specific activities or minimum hours.

“It’s self-driven. You get out of it what you put into it,” says Karmali. The ARK leaders know from experience that kindness is its own reward, and a demanding, structured approach would be counterproductive to their mission. Karmali explains, “Kindness is not just for other people. It’s also being kind to yourself, being vulnerable and allowing yourself to enjoy what you enjoy.” If that means doing something besides ARK, that’s okay, too.

Growing the membership is part of the council’s job, but it’s not the most important goal. The ARK council wants to inspire everyone to think about making kindness a regular part of their life.

“It doesn’t have to be difficult,” says Venkatesh. “Compliments cost nothing and give everything. Or you can just be helpful to someone when they need it. Being helpful is

kindness, too.” Opening a door for someone whose hands are full, working through a tough math problem with a classmate and granting a favor when asked don’t seem like much. But kindness doesn’t require a grand gesture. Every day, the impact of hundreds of small interactions between people accumulates and can turn into either a vicious cycle or a virtuous one. Acting with kindness helps ensure that the direction turns toward making everyone’s day better.

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So far, there is no adult auxiliary ARK, but adults (and teens who don’t want to take on organizing a new club to find opportunities for kindness) can follow ARK on Instagram (@greaterseattleark (<https://www.instagram.com/greaterseattleark/>)) for prompts and ideas. “If you’re not a risk-taker, just start small and dip your toes in enough to get out of your comfort zone,” Venkatesh advises. Teens who try out these activities may be inspired by the results to get involved on a bigger scale, as Venkatesh was. For teens who are thinking about starting an ARK club — or any new club — at their school, Karmali has one piece of advice.

“Don’t be scared. Just let go of your fears and whatever is holding you back.” Even if it’s scary, building your own ARK is worth it. Because, as Venkatesh says, “Improving someone else’s day can only improve your own life.”

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