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Eugene, Ore., high-school students' good intentions misunderstood

By BOB WELCH
The (Eugene) Register-Guard

EUGENE, Ore. — All they wanted to do was change the world, one random act of kindness at a time. Instead, they were met with furrowed brows, questioned by Eugene police and ousted by Valley River Center security officers.

"People can't accept the fact that there are other people who just want to be nice," says Sheldon High School senior Kelsey Hertel, who founded the school's new Random Acts of Kindness Club. "People don't trust each other. They think everyone's out to get them."

Ironically, that's exactly why Hertel founded the club in the first place. "Our community isn't giving enough," she says. "So we thought by doing random acts of kindness, we could totally change someone's day or life. And they could pay it forward to someone else. And one person at a time, we could make the world better."

When hearing about Hertel's idea, Joanne Moorefield, an International High School teacher, agreed to be the club's adviser. "I thought it was a wonderful idea," she says. "I liked the altruism, the idea of being nice without expecting anything in return — even community-service hours."

Hertel threw together a small publicity campaign and waited for fellow students to show up for the first meeting Oct. 29. One did. But that didn't deter Hertel.

The second meeting drew 37. She and other leaders rounded up more than a dozen students to offer free hugs at the Nov. 15 Oregon-Arizona football game at Autzen Stadium. "We'd seen it done on a YouTube video," she says. "It's awesome: giving total strangers hugs. That's spreading love."

Hertel estimates some 2,000 hugs were provided at no charge.

Word spread at school; the third meeting drew 71 students. A leadership team was chosen, including an ambassador of peace and a general of generosity.

They decided Random Act 2 would be offering free leaf-raking in neighborhoods near Sheldon: seven girls, one guy, eight rakes.

Then, unexpected resistance: "When we told one lady what we wanted to do," Hertel says, "she said, 'Go do your random acts of kindness somewhere else.' "

Another woman thought the group was trying to burglarize her house.

"We said, 'No, we're from the Random Acts of Kindness Club; we just want to rake your leaves.' "

The woman wasn't convinced. She called the police, whose log for the 11:12 a.m. report is headed, "Suspicious Subject(s)." The police arrived and interviewed the "suspicious subjects."

Random Act 3 unfolded at Valley River Center on "Black Friday," the busiest shopping day of the year. About two dozen students handed out cards saying things like "Have a nice day" and "You're awesome." (Chocolate mints included.) Shoppers were encouraged to take another card to give to someone else. "People's faces just lit up," Hertel says.

Until security guards showed up, that is. The group was given the boot under the mall's no-solicitation regulation, Hertel says. But, Kelsey argued they weren't taking, they were giving. Sorry.

"These kids kind of got tied up in the no-buy protest," mall Manager Robert McOmie says. "If we'd known about it in advance, we probably would have considered it. We understand the random-act-of-kindness thing. It was just the wrong day of the year."

Hertel is perplexed.

"Our culture is so based on greed that people don't believe goodness is real."

But she and the others aren't through trying to convince them. They're already planning a hot-chocolate giveaway at the downtown bus station and neighborhood Christmas caroling.

"If we keep being nice," Hertel says, "maybe people will finally understand that there really is love in the world."

Oh, these crazy kids today.

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