

Say Hello, Watch Wonderful Things Happen

By: Victoria Ford

Rev. William Simmons, the assistant pastor at the Sixth Street Baptist Church in Lakewood, is on a mission to say hello to everyone – that’s right, every man, woman and child he meets along his life’s journey. He has seen firsthand the impact of a simple greeting and feels the time is right to get back to basics to restore civility and cultivate personal connections.

As a member of the Ocean County Human Relations Commission, a volunteer group working under the auspices of the Ocean County Prosecutor’s Office, Simmons recalls the meeting last year where there was a discussion about helping out the community. Simmons spoke up with observations and anecdotes about encounters he has had and how a single word could change a person’s day. “Things have gotten so bad that people don’t acknowledge each other anymore,” he said.

For his day job, he works security at Six Flags Great Adventure in Jackson, where he interfaces with thousands of fun seekers on a regular basis. So he’s in the habit of saying hello. In fact, he’s well known for it. When he walks in his local Wawa store, he’ll hear “There’s the ‘hello’ guy!”

But racial, political, cultural and religious differences have somehow made it harder for strangers to say hello to each other, Simmons said. Manners have been forgotten; social etiquette and basic human kindness have been lost, in his opinion. (Preoccupation with smartphones is part of the problem, he noted, but by no means the whole cause.)

“People don’t know their neighbors anymore,” he said.

When he was coming up, all the parents on the block looked out for each other’s kids. They would watch each other’s homes when a family went away on vacation. Now a certain xenophobia or fear-based avoidance keeps people apart. Strangers, and even neighbors, regard each other with suspicion.

When Simmons laid this out for the Human Relations Commission, the rest of the board members caught on quickly and said let’s get behind this idea and push it – let’s make it a movement.

The Prosecutor’s Office got 250 hats made with the directive, “Say Hello” emblazoned across the front.

Continued on page 21



Ocean County Prosecutor Bradley D. Billheimer, Rev. William Simmons, Michael Colwell and Cristina Edwards. Photo Credit: Ocean County Prosecutor's Office

Say Hello Hats.
Photo Credit: C&H Staff



“I’m always out and about with my hat on,” Simmons said, bringing visibility to the idea.

Now he’s urging everyone to try it out for themselves. Say hello to a stranger, and “look at the expression on their face,” he said. The gesture can make someone’s day, Simmons points out. One woman he greeted in a store told him his kindness made her feel like she meant something to him.

Simmons believes many people, after so many months of

isolation during the pandemic, are now wanting to reconnect with others and will welcome the “Say Hello” initiative. He also feels the timing is perfect to “reunite” amid current sociopolitical unrest – to “let people know that we are all the same, and we need to say hello to break the ice. Once you say hello, a whole magnitude of things can break loose.”

When one person is impacted by a hello, he or she greets others they meet in their day. And soon the good cheer is spread exponentially. That’s just how easy it is, Simmons said.

“My plan is to get everybody in this country to say hello,” he said. “‘Hello’ could turn this whole country around.”

Simmons’ underlying observation is that human beings lead fast-paced lifestyles to match the fast-paced activities of the modern world. Nowadays people have gotten out of the habit of social interaction, often avoiding it altogether. But deliberately ignoring others should be uncomfortable, Simmons said.

“People crave and need attention, and by offering up the simplest greeting, it feels good to make others smile and feel like they are important. The power and importance of saying hello as you speak to someone on the street, at your workplace, or anywhere else, leaves a lasting impression.” It demonstrates respect and implies a certain value system, he added.

Once while shopping in Howell, Simmons recalled, his “hello” made an elderly woman cry. “I said, ‘Ma’am are you OK?’ She said, ‘No one has said hello to me in a long time. I live with my son and his wife. They don’t say hello or good morning; I am still sleeping when they go to work. When they come home, all they say is, ‘Did you feed the dog? Did you feed the cat?’” She said, ‘I didn’t think the word hello meant so much until right now. Thank you.’”

Another man Simmons met while walking. When he said hello the man asked, “Do I know you?” Simmons said “No, but you do now.” And they sat and started talking – about sports, work, and current events. After 45 minutes he said he had to go. “I wish I could sit here all day with you,” he told Simmons.

To inquire about purchasing a hat, contact Simmons directly at: simms2@optonline.net or phone the Prosecutor’s Office at (732) 929-2027.