

Give Thanks

By Chris Hayhurst

For the kids in Matt Marciano's social studies class at Long Valley Middle School in Long Valley, N.J., Thanksgiving is a time for great ideas. "We do this thing where we look at the different foods that people eat around the world," says Marciano. "It's really an eye-opener." The lesson, he explains, teaches students to be grateful for what they have. But it also gets them thinking—about Thanksgiving, about their lives, and about their biggest assignment of the year: "To find a way they can change the world," he explains, "and then do it by June."

Each student comes up with his or her own project, Marciano says. Ryan A., for example, led a group walk to raise awareness about vascular birthmarks. Ryan's younger brother was born with one of those types of birthmarks over his right eye. "He's had 12 surgeries so far, so I just wanted people to know more about what he's going through," says Ryan, 13.

Another student, Kieran N., also 13, organized a blood drive in honor of a cousin who has leukemia. "She had told me how when she received blood she

felt so much better," says Kieran. "So my mother and sister and I sat outside my cousin's church, and as people came out we just asked them to sign up to give blood. We got 38 people to sign up, and for each person who gives blood you get enough for three people, so we were able to help not only my cousin but a lot of other people too."

Expressing gratitude is not just nice. It's also good for your health.

Doing Good and Feeling Good

Both Kieran and Ryan say their experience in Marciano's class taught them something they'll never forget: When we give to others, we're really giving thanks; and giving thanks feels good. Putting on the blood drive "was really nice," says Kieran. "Everyone was so appreciative—my cousin, her mother, everyone at the church. It made me happy to see that I could make a difference, and it also made me more thankful for everything I have in my own life—my family and my health, my friends. Now I tell my mom and dad and my sister how thankful I am for them every night."

Giving thanks, says Kieran, whether it's by giving back to the community or by saying "thank you"



The Gratitude Attitude

To experience gratitude, says psychologist Jeffrey Froh, two things have to happen. "First you have to acknowledge that there is goodness in your life; then you have to admit that the reason for that goodness lies partially outside of yourself."

Aced that last test?

"You can say, 'Hey, look, I studied really hard and gave up going to practice' or whatever the case is, and that's why you did well," Froh says. "But it's also important to acknowledge that your friend didn't go to practice either and studied with you, or your mom helped out with flash cards the night before the exam."

Which leads us to the third (and possibly most essential) step: Actually say thanks!

to a family member, may be a simple gesture, but it's one that offers big returns. "It makes them feel good, but it also makes you feel good because you know they know how grateful you are for them."

Kieran's appreciation for gratitude is something psychologist Jeffrey Froh knows well. Froh, an assistant professor at Hofstra University in Hempstead, N.Y., has studied the emotion for years, and time and time again he's found the same thing: Gratitude, which he defines as "a sense of thankfulness and joy in receiving some kind of benefit," is good for us. Sure, expressing thanks is nice (not to mention polite). And those who are thankful are more likely to give. But the big news is this: Grateful people—and grateful young people in particular—are healthier and happier than those who are not.

"Grateful kids tend to be happier and more satisfied with their lives," says Froh. "They experience more positive emotion; they're more optimistic; they have more satisfaction with school, their family, [and] their friends. They're less envious, less materialistic, less depressed. They report higher GPAs. The list goes on."

Paying It Forward

Each year, Marciano's students learn something about gratitude in the classroom when they celebrate Thanksgiving. Later, they express that gratitude individually by giving back to their community.

Elsewhere, of course, kids give thanks in other ways. In Atlantic, Iowa, for example, Maren McNees, a 15-year-old sophomore at Atlantic High School, has made it her mission (and 2011 New Year's resolution) to do "at least one good deed every day" for someone who could use her help. "It could be anything," she says. "Once I helped clean out books from a lady's attic. I've cleaned up people's yards, shoveled snow. Sometimes it's the smallest thing, like holding the door for someone."

This Thanksgiving, Maren says, she'll be there at the table with her family, ready to feast. But before she digs in, she'll certainly give thanks. And, she says, she'll also give back. "I haven't made any plans yet, but something will come up. There's always something you can do." **CH**



Optimistic Outlook

Thankful teens aren't the only young people finding health benefits from their outlook on life. Young optimists are healthier too. Optimists are people who look on the "bright side of life" or see a glass as "half full" instead of "half empty." A recent study showed that teenage optimists are less likely to develop depression, abuse drugs or alcohol, or have antisocial behaviors.

It would be great if we could always maintain a positive, optimistic attitude about everything, says Dr. George Patton. He led the group that studied optimistic teens. But it's not realistic to look on the bright side all the time. Instead, he suggests, when life gets tough, try to keep things in perspective. If you can "put yourself in the shoes of others," suggests Patton, you're headed in the right direction.

Think About It

Think of the people in your life that you're thankful for. What sort of things have they done for you, and how have they helped you become the person you are today?