

Exploring
the life
lessons we
all have to
share forges
stronger
relationships
and deeper
empathy.

THE WISDOM CORRIDOR

project

Happiness is here and now.
I've dropped all my worries.
Nowhere to go
Nothing to do
And I'm not in a hurry.

—Taken from “The Happiness Song” from *The Happiness Monk of Bhutan* (Originally credited to Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh)

|| Bridget Belardi
Parent and teacher



It might be surprising to learn that students at Foster Elementary School, which is tucked into a small suburb outside of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, begin some lessons with teachers in India connecting via Zoom or with songs from the Happiness Monk of Bhutan. When Project FUEL is involved, however, the students know to expect meaningful lessons from almost anywhere.





Project FUEL (Forwarding the Understanding of Every Life Lesson), founded in 2009 by Deepak Ramola, collects life lessons from people all over the world. The organization archives these lessons and passes them along for others to learn from, using documents, social media, workshops, and interactive displays. Deepak began the project with this foundational belief: “Life lessons that come to us from another human being can shine the light on the understanding of our own life.”

Deepak has collected lessons from members of the Maasai tribe (“One must respect a warrior”), Syrian refugees (“Geographical borders are useless because they make you judge others.” -Jihad Asad), elders in end-of-life facilities (“Resolve all conflicts before you go.” -Bhairav Nath Shukla), elementary school students in the United States (“Always read the directions.” -Evan Carson), and so many more.

As a subset of Project FUEL, Deepak and his team created The Wisdom Corridor Project for schools. Creating a Wisdom Corridor is a wonderful opportunity for students to get to know teachers outside of the formal curriculum, learn about their life lessons, and then transform the school corridors into vibrant learning environments that showcase the

teachers’ powerful life lessons to share with everyone who passes through the school.

Project FUEL’s training guides a group of 10-12 students (the Wisdom Squad) to become empathic interviewers who can add to the growing repository of life lessons. The sessions last for several weeks and students practice collecting life lessons from friends and family members using a series of open-ended questions. They learn to listen and ask appropriate follow-up questions.

After a few practice rounds of interviews, each Wisdom Squad member pairs with a school faculty member. Some teachers meet students in an informal place, such as the local ice cream stand or on the playground at lunch time. Students are more likely to feel comfortable interviewing their teachers in an informal, welcoming environment. They love seeing their teachers in a different atmosphere — one that takes away any intimidation of a formal classroom situation or hierarchy.

The Collaboration

In 2019, the Wisdom Corridor project was featured at the HundrED Global Collection in Helsinki, Finland, which highlights the 100 brightest education innovations from around the world. It was here that Deepak



met Scott Miller and Maureen Frew from Avonworth School District in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Scott and Maureen had come to the HundrED convention to showcase their JAM group — a maker/kindness club where students use the school’s makerspace to create items they sell to raise money for charitable organizations. JAM’s #bethekindkid movement has sold over 100,000 t-shirts to encourage everyone, not just kids, to think selflessly and develop a wider view of the world.

When the Wisdom Corridor leader and the #bethekindkid creators met, they became excited about combining forces to spread kindness and understanding on a larger scale. Upon returning to the United States, Scott and Maureen partnered with The Grable Foundation to begin training students at Avonworth and other schools in the Pittsburgh region to create Wisdom Corridors in their buildings. The Grable Foundation brought Deepak to Pittsburgh for in-person training and arranged for Richa Nautiyal to conduct virtual sessions in each school.

The Wisdom Squads

Currently, there are 19 Wisdom Squads in the United States—most are in the Pittsburgh area. Sometimes, the groups meet to share their experiences with the Wisdom Corridor and discuss how the project has impacted their schools. In 2023, the Squads met in person with Deepak and the leaders at Avonworth Primary Center to plan a regional event that will showcase all of the life lessons collected. The students planned



a public Wisdom Wall in a public venue in downtown Pittsburgh, with interviewers on hand to share their experiences and food trucks to provide refreshments. The group also plans to grow the squads and develop national leadership for The Wisdom Corridor.

The 12 members of Foster School’s Wisdom Squad, 3rd- and 4th-graders, volunteered to come to school early for sunrise Zoom sessions with Richa in India. From the start, Richa brought a spirit of joy, comfort, and fun while teaching students how to be good listeners and conversationalists, how to ask follow-up questions, and that silence and “think time” are valuable. She taught the students about being a compassionate and mindful listener — a valuable lesson for everyone to learn. She recommended the strategy of encouraging others to “talk more about that,” noting that everyone we speak to, not just the interviewees, would appreciate such evidence of interest and encouragement to elaborate on their stories.

Students rarely see teachers as “real” or having vulnerabilities. The interviews were eye-opening



for the students, as they learned about their teachers through empathic listening. They also learned about connections they shared with their teachers, such as hobbies and other interests beyond school. Ava Kostewicz, a 3rd-grader, said, “It’s usually the teacher asking questions of the students, so having the teachers be the interviewee is even more fun and educational. I like asking them tough questions for once.”

While the theory and training of the Wisdom Corridors is the same, each final project is different and unique to the particular school community. At Avonworth Primary Center, the Wisdom Squad are in kindergarten through 2nd grade. As lengthy paragraphs would be meaningless for early readers, Maureen Frew posted each teacher’s life lesson in one sentence accompanied by a photo and a QR code. Using their iPads, students access the QR codes, which take them to videos of the teachers talking about their life lessons. One 1st-grader there often walks through the hall just to “visit” with her retired kindergarten teacher and “hear” her voice. At Foster Elementary, students decided they should also publish the lessons in a printed book to be placed in the school’s library and in the local public library in order to reach as many people as possible. Their follow-up project will be to interview community members and add their stories to the book. The extensions are limitless.

Our Stories, Our Wisdom

Project FUEL’s power also extended into my home this semester. My son, Mason Creagh, is in the middle of the training process at his school. He said, “It’s a great way to connect with friends and learn how other people are feeling. I learned that I completely misjudged people before I heard their life story and lesson.” Mason had the brilliant idea to add a Wisdom Wall in our house — a collection of photos and words of wisdom from our family members.

At a time when social-emotional learning is most critical, the Wisdom Corridor project brings self-awareness, societal perception, and relationship skills. While the Wisdom Squads practice empathic interviewing skills and compassionate communication, the rest of the school gains a wider perspective on the world outside of the classroom walls. Everyone has a story to tell; through those stories, we can learn creative and effective solutions that will help us all live our best, connected lives.

It’s a simple question, but merits some reflection.

Take a quiet moment to think about it.

What is your life lesson?

To become involved in The Wisdom Corridor Project, visit this website for more information: wisdomcorridor.com