

Strangers spread love to those in need through the mail this Valentine's Day



A woman receives a letter from Love For Our Elders

The Valentine Project puts together Valentine's Day gift boxes for children with cancer or chronic illnesses.



Although Valentine's Day is usually about showing loved ones how much they are cared for, many nonprofits are spreading love to people they have never met this Valentine's Day by sending cards and gifts to people who are lonely on the holiday. These nonprofits aim to show people going through hard times that they are not alone, with a personal gesture of physical handmade cards and gifts.

One organization, Love For Our Elders, was created 10 years ago by Jacob Cramer, founder and executive director. After his grandfather died, Cramer started volunteering at senior communities, where he noticed that loneliness was a common problem; he described it as an "epidemic." The National Library of Medicine indicates that about 24 percent of U.S. adults 65 years or older are considered socially isolated—having infrequent social contact and relationships. To address this issue, Cramer established his nonprofit.

Family and friends of elders submit a short bio, as well as a photo and the mailing address of an isolated elder to Love For Our Elders, which posts

around 30 on its website. Cramer said that more than 5,000 volunteers a month work with them, including students in 26 college and high school campus chapters who write letters to elders in their local communities.

Love For Our Elders is funded by donations; the sale of sweatshirts, mugs and their book, *Grandma's Letter Exchange*; and the collection of donations from unwanted gift card balances through a program called CharityChoice.

Every year on Cramer's grandmother's birthday, Feb. 26, Love For Our Elders celebrates "Letter to an Elder Day," when people are encouraged to write to any elder in their lives or to an elder that they don't yet know.

"It's super important after the holidays to connect with our elders because it can be a really lonely and isolating time and there's gloomy weather outside," Cramer said.

He added that one elder who received letters said she was "overjoyed with love and excitement for these cards and she's telling everyone she sees about the experience."

Love For Our Elders isn't the only organization that spreads love through the mail for Valentine's Day; Soldiers' Angels is a nonprofit that collects letters to send to hospitalized veterans at Department of Veterans Affairs hospitals, active-duty military bases and service members in deployment. Soldiers' Angels is funded by both corporate and private donations. The organization's goal is to do something nice for soldiers who often are away from their families during Valentine's Day. Amy Palmer, president and CEO, said volunteers choose from 163 sites to send their letters to—sometimes choosing sites with soldiers they know.

Some of the cards going to foster kids through the Cards of Hope program



“Thank you all so much for what you do for us. It is truly appreciated,” one letter recipient said. “I am humbled to feel so much love and care from strangers. But you’re not strangers, you’re truly family.”

Another organization that sends endearment to those who need it is The Valentine Project, which mails Valentine’s Day gift boxes to children with cancer and chronic illnesses and their siblings, using the Postal Service to ship the packages to children nationwide.

Andrea Margida, president and CEO, and her family started the organization 14 years ago when her son volunteered at a camp that childhood cancer patients around the same age attended. He talked to a girl at the camp, and found that she had missed out on things that were normal parts of growing up. “His heart really went out to her,” Margida said.

She said that instead of Valentine’s Day being a day of fun, it often highlights these kids’ loneliness and isolation from their peers, so sending a card really makes a difference in their happiness. Her son set up surprise Valentine’s Day gifts for 88 kids with cancer that year—but that was just the beginning.

Every year, The Valentine Project sends 500 to 1,000 valentine gift

packages with the help of about 1,000 volunteers. They receive funding from donations, and get donated materials needed for sending out letters from Amazon. The packages include candy, toys, puzzles and, sometimes, cards. To send these packages, they solely rely on USPS to get the kids their gifts because of the low shipping costs.

“I would like to thank the people who deliver mail and let them know that this is such a big deal for these children,” Margida said. “People don’t realize the impact it can have on someone.”

Another organization that helps kids through tough times is Braid Mission, a foster youth mentoring program. Its Cards of Hope program has provided letters of encouragement to more than 40,000 foster youths since 2014. Rebecca Edwards, co-founder and director, went to a foster care museum and saw a display that illustrated the fact that foster youth rarely receive birthday cards. After seeing the placard, Edwards and her co-founder, Christopher Chase, were inspired to do something to make special days for foster youths a little bit brighter.

They began collecting letters specifically aimed at making birthdays and holidays special for foster youths in the San Francisco Bay area. However, their

program grew exponentially—especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, when people were searching for volunteer opportunities that they could perform at home. In 2019 they received 5,500 cards, in 2020 they received about 8,000, and in 2023 they received about 13,000 cards. Cards of Hope now sends general cards of encouragement and birthday cards to foster youths across the country.

To fund this effort, Braid Mission accepts donations and sells handmade cards on its Etsy page.

In addition to lifting the spirits of foster youths, Edwards said the program raises awareness and empathy for the feelings that foster youth are going through.

“These are children who have been separated from the people who are supposed to care for them through no fault of their own,” Edwards said. “It can be really lonely.”

Valentine’s Day is a time of love and warmth, so showing people, even strangers, care and attention can brighten a day that otherwise might feel lonely. These organizations and many others have created a way to show love and warmth using the unique power of the time-honored method of the mail. **PR**