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A compelling exhibition of compassion

We hear so much about anger these days that at times it seems like kindness is in short supply.

But Jerry Alonzo of Geneseo, an artist who works in wood, knows differently.

Earlier this year, Alonzo, who is also a retired Livingston County judge, took to the road in search of examples and definitions of compassion.

Inspired by the international Charter for Compassion movement and funded by the Genesee Valley Council on the Arts, he appeared before church groups, often joined by Lori McEvoy of the Livingston County Coalition of Churches. He also visited school classes and other groups.

At each session, he asked his listeners to write about compassion in 25 words or less.



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GOOD NEWS

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"Some people thought I was from Mars," says Alonzo, 63. "But others immediately got it."

And so they did. After a slow start, the responses flowed in. It turns out that compassion — the ability to feel sympathy for others and to offer them help — is alive and well.

The proof of this will be on display at the Big Springs Museum in Caledonia, Livingston County, when Alonzo's project,

If you go

What: "The Art of Compassion," a wood-sculpture exhibit by Geneseo artist Jerry Alonzo.

Where: Big Springs Museum, 3095 Main St., Caledonia, Livingston County.

When: Opening reception, 5 to 7 p.m. Oct. 16; talk by the artist, 3 p.m. Oct. 17. Exhibit runs through Nov. 15; call (585) 538-9880 for hours.

Admission: Free.

"The Art of Compassion," opens on Oct. 16.

In the exhibit, each individual's responses will be displayed on small wood tiles, their words engraved by Bill Neal of Wyoming, Wyoming County.

The tiles will be displayed on

seven wood columns created by Alonzo. He has also made two benches to be placed in the middle of the columns so people can sit and talk with each other.

Alonzo granted anonymity to all of the more than 300 participants, a decision that no doubt led people to reveal more about their lives.

"There is a baby girl, her mother on cocaine and her father an alcoholic," wrote one respondent. "They go on vacation and leave their daughter with a friend who puts her in an adoption center and two people adopt her. Twelve years later the girl sits in classroom writing about it as an example of compassion. That girl is me."

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Another person wrote: "13 years old, Sibley's toy department, Christmas time. Small black youngster eyeing an airplane. Employee trying to move

him on. I bought it and had the clerk give it to him. Best Christmas I ever had."

Different themes emerge in the other responses, but taken together they make a convincing case for compassion. They also suggest it's not automatic. It takes

time, it takes commitment; it takes a willingness to listen to others.

"It's the sense of trying to place myself in someone else's place," says Alonzo, who, with this project has done just that, offering a quiet counterpoint to the anger in the world.