

Exhibit teaches the true art of compassion

What is compassion?

"When everyone told the 8th-grade girl not to accept an invitation to dance with an unpopular boy, she did it anyway."

Those few words, etched on a small plaque that is part of Geneseo artist Jerry Alonzo's "The Art of Compassion" exhibit, express the simple truth of it. The exhibit consists of seven columns, holding more than 300 descriptions of compassion, each one inviting a visitor into the heart of another.

Alonzo, who specializes in wood sculpture, visited the Chautauqua Institution in the summer of 2009 with his wife Kate. They listened to a series of talks, from many faith perspectives, on the meaning of compassion. "They all made a central point" he says — a belief in the Golden Rule.

He got the idea to share people's experiences of compassion in a work of art. He began to solicit short written descriptions —



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25 words or fewer. It was slow going at first, but as word spread, the responses picked up. "After I spread all these messages out across my dining room," Alonzo says, "I could see that the message is clear: Compassion is about listening, about really hearing someone's story."

He's been touring his exhibit around the Rochester area. This week, it's at the Henrietta United Church of Christ at 1400 Lehigh Station Road (it's open to the public from 2 to 6 p.m. Friday).

At the church, the exhibit is part of a weeklong celebration of compassion. It began Sunday with a sermon by Pastor David Inglis, who says people have lost

touch with compassion because, even in our efforts to be of service, we rely too much on abstractions and numbers. "You have to see with your heart to experience the meaning of compassion," Inglis says.

To be compassionate, he says, we must not allow ourselves to go numb to the suffering of others, we must allow ourselves to connect to the people around us. "You have to slow down and really listen," Alonzo says.

When you take a little time to read the simple definitions included in the exhibit, it's clear that compassion really is an art.

"Sitting by the bed of a dying relative who is unconscious so they will not be alone when they die," says one. "Compassion is taking care of someone's hangover," says another. "Coffee, juice, fresh diapers and a warm welcome greet the 5 a.m. visitors' bus to the prison," says another.

The exhibit includes two small seats where visitors can reflect

If you go

The Art of Compassion will be on display at:

Sweet Briar, 5126 Geneseo-Mt. Morris Road, Geneseo; Jan. 18-31; 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday; 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday; closed Wednesday and Sunday.

Sacred Heart Cathedral, 296 Flower City Park, March 9-April 12; 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. daily.

for a time on what it means to connect deeply with another. "In the nursing home, my wife cleans my mother's glasses, improving her view and literally seeing the world through her eyes."

My favorite: "A sunny walk with your partner who no longer knows your name."

You cannot command compassion, Inglis says. It must come from within, from the deep hunger to connect. It doesn't come to us by accident, but it is free for the asking. □