



*On Tuesday, September 6, 2022, Boston University Academy Head of School Chris Kolovos welcomed students, faculty, and staff back to school with the following opening remarks on the theme of kindness, a touchstone of the BUA school community.*

### **On Kindness**

Good morning. It is a real pleasure to see you all today. This is a year we have all been looking forward to for quite some time. It is a year that promises a level of normalcy that we have not experienced in quite a while – and that you all deserve. In just a few days, we will lean back into our traditions, with a group of us heading off to Camp Burgess for the first time since before the pandemic.

It is also a special year for another reason. This marks the 30th anniversary of this school's existence. It is a chance for us to think back on the legacy we have inherited from the teachers, staff, and students who have come before us and a chance to dream about the future that we will build together.

In a few moments, I will welcome Lizzie Seward, our Student Council president, up to offer a few words of welcome. But before we do that, I'd like to offer some thoughts as we start the term together, as I do at the start of each of our terms.

My talk this morning is prompted in part by my son, Charlie, whom many of you have heard about; if you have not, you will hear plenty over the next few years! He is two years old. Every morning, this is his routine. He comes downstairs and, before demanding his milk, he insists on seeing his toaster. Now, mind you, this is not an actual kitchen appliance. It is a toy toaster we bought from a Greek online toy store. If you press a button, it announces what kind of toast it's making – how dark or how light the toast should be; whether there's peanut butter or marmalade or honey on the toast. I'm not sure why he loves this toy; it's a really strange little thing. But he loves it. Before

he starts his day, he has to go to “Toaster” and ask him if he had a good sleep. “Toaster, have you had a good sleep?” My wife and I smile every morning when we hear that. As I think about it, the reason is because it gives us hope that we are raising a kind person.

This morning I want to talk about kindness. It is a word that we use a great deal around here, and for good reason. We talk about a kind and curious community made up of kind and curious people. I am justifiably proud that those things are true, especially because they are deeply countercultural in a world that is focused so much on achievement, getting ahead, and, increasingly, incivility. But it is a touchstone for us here at BUA. And I think it’s worth exploring together. So I’ll offer just three ideas this morning about kindness.

### ***Kindness is an Action***

Take a moment to think about a time when somebody was kind to you. Think about where you were; think about what they did; think about how it made you feel. Some of you might notice a little warmth in your chest. You might be cracking a half smile.

Kindness is not just sympathy or empathy, although those things may well be required for true kindness. Nor is it being nice. There is a superficiality about being nice. Kindness is different. Kindness is action. It is a choice we make. It is a choice we make to do something that inspires a positive feeling in another human being – often with no benefit to ourselves, sometimes with a cost to ourselves.

At times, being kind is easy. It is easy in those moments when we are relaxed, or when we are interacting with somebody who is close to us or somebody we love. At other times, though, it is harder. I think about a day, like today, which promises to be pouring. I imagine some of you being late to your BU class and still making the decision to hold the door outside the GSU for somebody you do not know, with nobody around you to witness it and give you credit. You choose to hold the door anyway. Those small moments become habit. It is in those small moments when character is built. Those are the things we expect from you when we talk about being kind.

## ***Kindness Feels Good***

Earlier this summer, I was at Trader Joe's. I was in a rush. I was a little nervous because of COVID: it was crowded, and I have a young family. I was wearing my mask, it was hot, and I was impatient. As I turned the corner from the produce section to the refrigerator section, I saw an old woman reaching up for a package of sliced cheese near the top of the refrigerator section. I felt disgusted by the people standing around her not helping. I paused there feeling self-righteous and angry, and then intensely stupid for not doing the thing I should have done from the beginning, which is to go over and help her. That's what I did. As I began to walk away, she turned to me, took my arm, and asked, "Can you do something for me?" I said, "Sure." She said, "Please tell your mother that she raised you well." I still have not told my mother – I should. But I will tell you this: I had a much better day after that moment with the old woman at Trader Joe's.

There is something physiological – something chemical – about kindness and its effect on us. Some of you might have studied this in your classes. Being kind has been shown to produce elevated levels of oxytocin, dopamine, and serotonin. It can decrease blood pressure. It leads to something that is more colloquially called a "helper's high." We have evolved this way, researchers think, in cooperative and altruistic communities.

But there are more than just short term benefits that come from kindness. Those of you here last year may remember me talking about my old headmaster, Mr. Jarvis, who was a man of the cloth. I was reading one of his talks recently, and he included this passage: "I have been present at a number of deaths. I've never yet heard a dying man or woman brag about how much money he made or how successful he was. My experience is that a dying man looking back on his life is proudest to have helped people, of having used his time and talents to do something for others." To do something for others. Kindness produces not just an immediate benefit, but also long term fulfillment and purpose.

## ***Kindness is Contagious***

Many of you know that I love and admire Mr. Rogers, who was a longtime host of a children's program on PBS. One Sunday evening, my wife and I watched "A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood" starring Tom Hanks about the life and times of Mr. Rogers – a man who is the closest thing to a saint we have seen on television. I came to work the next morning in a much better mood, much more patient, and a much better listener. I simply wanted to be a better person because of the model that he set.

There is real science too – dozens of studies from social psychology – supporting the idea of a contagion effect of kindness. The studies show that when people observe others being more generous, more loving, and more kind, the observers adopt similar behaviors. Those actions create ripples in a community. Think about the line of cars at a drive through when somebody pays for the car immediately behind them, and then that process continues sometimes for minutes, sometimes for hours. It is that kind of ripple that I see in this community – in all of you.

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You have heard me recite this adage before, but it bears repeating: "From those to whom much is given, much is expected." You all have been given so much, not the least of which is the education that you have received and you will receive here. We appropriately expect a great deal from you. I ask you to find a way today, this week, this year to do something that is within all of our means: be kind to another human being. Maybe that means helping a new student find her way when she's looking for the black box theater. Maybe it's holding the door. Maybe it's reaching out to somebody at lunch who looks like they could use a friend. Find a way to make somebody else's day better and create those ripples throughout our community. Thank you very much, and have a wonderful school year.