

ON THE LEVEL

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*Jeremy Del Rio
and Thrive
Collective Are
Beating the
Virus with
Kindness*



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#kindnessbeatsthevirus

IN NEW YORK, STUDENTS AND ARTISTS COMBAT THE CORONAVIRUS WITH KINDNESS

By **Jeremy Del Rio** (New York 2010)



synonymous with practical, tangible, and demonstrable grace. The kindness we've seen modeled by first responders, health care professionals, and other essential workers. What if kindness like that goes viral? What if a novel strain of corona kindness was as infectious as COVID-19? How might the world be different if students, parents, youth workers, and artists used social distancing to create a more beautiful world together?

Jon, an accomplished emcee and muralist with Thrive Collective asked, "During a global health crisis, how might we overcome an

**"All the things we are afraid to do are the things that make us human. We are trying to bring that humanity back and give people hope."
— Edmond Ntango**

Week four of the quarantine was the hardest for me. Every day, for seven consecutive days, different friends lost one or both parents or grandparents to the virus. I was torn between profound relief that no one in my immediate family was infected and staggering grief for my friends. Just then, someone forwarded to me a YouTube conspiracy video calling the coronavirus a "fake pandemic," and I nearly lost it.

Greetings from New York City, the epicenter of COVID-19 hope and healing.

By now, you're probably somewhere between overwhelmed and inoculated from the bad news stories emanating from my city and our tristate area. This is not one of those stories although it has been infused by the unimaginable and very real trauma ravaging the city and people I love.

On March 18, just two days before Governor Cuomo issued the stay-at-home order for New York, a small group at Thrive Collective met to have a planning meeting. Thrive Collective is a nonprofit organization that exists to create hope and opportunity through arts, sports, and mentoring. The group included myself, street art legend Toofly, teaching artist Jon Souza, and five students. We wrestled with two critical questions: How could we pivot our school-based arts and mentoring programs online when schools were closing indefinitely? What unique value could our community of artists and students offer a world shattered by an unprecedented global pandemic? We were not nurses or doctors or essential workers.

As the conversation evolved, the questions converged into a much bigger idea.

What if the catalyst for long-term recovery might be old-fashioned kindness? We're talking about the type of kindness that's

invisible, incurable, highly infectious killer bent on destroying humankind?" Five weeks later, the question took on a deeper meaning when Jon's wife lost her grandfather to the illness. Five of his family members in New York and Brazil were also hospitalized.

What Jon understood is that art, in all its forms, helps us process and heal from pain. It also empowers us to imagine and create worlds that don't yet exist. He challenged us to engage our network of creative people to ensure access to art resources for youth in New York City and beyond.

Jon helped to frame the strategy our students then constructed. Like Jon, Edmond Ntango, a Thrive Collective student, believed that our responsibility during the crisis was bigger than merely moving classroom programs online. He said, "All the things we are afraid to do are the things that make us human. We are trying to bring that humanity back and give people hope."

For Edmond, the conversation was very personal. Born in a refugee camp in Tanzania, his parents had escaped the Rwandan genocide. He came to Brooklyn as a boy. In the five years since joining Thrive Collective as a high school freshman, he has experienced the power of art to heal and empower him as a leader.

Also present was Lymarie Monzón, a 16-year-old high school student from Manhattan's Lower East Side. She insisted we not forget the 40 schools and 2,500 students we had already committed to this spring. Lymarie stated, "It's really important that we all share how we're coping." She advocated for the creation of resources teachers could use during the quarantine. "We can make this something that we look back on and say, "That was a horrible catastrophe, but we dealt with it in a way that made sense and helped people."

Our second planning meeting abruptly ended when Governor Cuomo ordered the quarantine and instructed nonessential workers, children, and seniors to go home and stay home indefinitely. By then, the foundation of Thrive Collective's response was laid. The students launched a hashtag challenge to decide a name for their campaign. #kindnessbeatsthevirus, suggested by a student from Boston, won. We began engaging students and artists on Instagram with daily hashtag challenges. Within a week, we launched the free "Tools for Schools" online catalog at ThriveCollective.org/Kindness.

By mid-April, the campaign grew to include a free school mural contest, contributions of coloring pages, content from scores of artists worldwide, lesson plans with daily activity prompts, video tutorials, and remote learning classes for schools. We witnessed a growing collection of social media posts tagging #kindnessbeatsthevirus from students, artists, and volunteers around the world to testify that kindness may indeed go viral.

Acclaimed New York actress, Luna Lauren Vélez (*Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*) heard about the effort and was the first national voice to lend support. "Shared trauma creates opportunities for shared healing," Vélez said. "Our most basic human instincts require connection to heal in community. Whether you identify as an artist or simply as human, the pandemic provides unique moments to connect with others creatively."

Next, NYC graffiti pioneers Crash, Sonic, and Bio from Tats Cru, Inc. volunteered to expand the campaign by curating the *Wildstyle Coloring Book*. Within a week of the first book's release, orphanages and children's hospitals from as far away as Thailand and Paris were sending photos of colored sheets. Locally, humanitarian groups were printing copies and distributing them to juvenile detention facilities along with emergency groceries and care packages. The coloring book turned into a two-volume series because of the response from artists around the world.

As I write this, experts tell us the coronavirus is trending in the right direction in NYC. With many people still dying, it feels premature to celebrate anytime soon, but it's never too soon to hope. It's never too early to start healing.

Today is a great day to creatively connect with neighbors and express kindness, gratitude, generosity, or compassion. Creativity helps us get there! Our students taught me that.

Jeremy Del Rio (New York 2010) co-founded Thrive Collective. Help kindness go viral. Post drawings, photos, videos, or songs on social media and tag @NYCThrive and #kindnessbeatsthevirus.