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Local Government Reconsidered

Reimagining Local Government: Strengthening  
Democracy in Our Communities

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Feb 25th, 12:00 AM

## Kindness Initiative

Tom Tait  
*Mayor of Anaheim*

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Tait, Tom, "Kindness Initiative" (2016). *Local Government Reconsidered*. 5.  
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## The Kindness Initiative

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Kindness is free.

Kindness is contagious.

Kindness is unifying.

Kindness is giving a pass.

Kindness is unpredictable.

Kindness is working in Anaheim.

The Kindness Initiative  
*It starts by being kind.*

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Five years ago, when Tom Tait began his first term as the Mayor of the Great City of Anaheim, he took the reins of a complex set of challenges.

To most of the world, Anaheim is known as the home of world-class sports teams, internationally renowned attractions, and of course - a very famous mouse. Yet in stark parallel, the city also faced some of the most challenging issues to confront a mayor; homelessness, drug abuse, gang violence and human trafficking.

However Tom had a plan. A single strategy to bring together the polar opposites; to empower law enforcement, community leaders and civil servants; and ultimately - to strengthen the fabric of the city itself.

His strategy: Kindness.

The concept of Kindness as a healing agent for the city didn't start with Tom. It began with a little girl named Natasha Sarah Jaievsky many years earlier. Sadly, Natasha's life ended far too young when she died in an accident while her family was on vacation.

When her father arrived home to Anaheim, he discovered a series of drawings and writings by young Natasha on the importance of Kindness. As a holistic doctor, he was incredibly moved by his daughter's writings. He knew firsthand the healing powers of such a powerful word - and he set out to create a campaign to "Make Kindness Contagious."

Tom met Dr. Jaievsky while serving as a City Council member. In his role on City Council, Tom worked to help solve the myriad issues of the city - however he always felt that conventional solutions were treating the symptoms - not the causes. The idea of stimulating the city to heal itself from within through kindness resonated with Tom and he caught the bug.

Together, they saw clearly that just as holistic medicine can be used to stimulate the body to heal itself, the spreading of kindness can be used to heal a city from within. Inspired by Natasha

and her father, Tom took the brave step of running for mayor - and doing so on a platform of instilling Kindness as a core value in the city.

Today, Tom's *Kindness Initiative* has evolved and taken on a life of its own.

Webster's defines "Kindness" as the quality or state of being kind or a kind act.

Kindness is not passive. As Tom says, "You can't sit on your couch and be kind." It takes action. And it is done without strings or expectations.

It's also incredibly simple. One can be kind by spending an extra five minutes with a friend who needs an ear. Kindness is letting the young mom with two toddlers cut ahead of you at the supermarket. Kindness is a cop giving a kid a ride home rather than busting him late after curfew because it's clearly his first time and he knows there won't be a second.

Webster's defines "Initiative" as of or relating to initiation.

It's starting something from nothing. Poof! A thing that didn't exist five minutes ago is now real and tangible.

And this is where it gets fun for Mayor Tait. He has created a program that costs nothing, that anyone can start, that spreads like a virus, that does significant good. It's a program that any city can follow. Or school; or community; or nation.

The Kindness Initiative. Here are it's fundamental principles:

### **Kindness is free.**

Even as Mayor, and despite the tremendous need, Tom doesn't have a big budget to create programs. Which is fine with Tom. It's free to be kind. He spends his days talking about kindness and the benefits of being kind - and there's no need to appropriate any city funds.

The best part, Tom simply needs to plant a few seeds and folks seem to take it from there. From the schools to the civil servants to the corporations - groups and individuals are starting their own campaigns of kindness.

### **Kindness is contagious.**

The thing about kind acts: they multiply. A teacher who's shown extra kindness at the DMV stays late to help a struggling student who forgoes a night out with his friends to chip in at home.

One act begets another. And so on.

During this school year, the Anaheim Public School System committed to - and succeeded in - creating one million acts of kindness. Imagine the ripple effects those will have in the coming school years, out into the community, and out into the world...

## **Kindness is unifying.**

The German word, 'mitsein' doesn't translate directly into English. The closest meaning is 'being with.' It's how the Germans define coming together as a community. Kindness brings people together to *be with* one another - within families and across social strata - regardless of age, denomination, gender or local sports allegiance.

It also plays a part in what Tom sees as a primary responsibility of the office of the Mayor: to prepare the citizenry for a situation in which the city services they've come to rely upon may not be available.

In the simplest terms, more than 99 percent of the community relies upon less than one percent to put out the fires, patrol the streets and keep them safe. In the event of a major earthquake or other catastrophic event, the math does not work out.

Neighborhoods will have to pull together. People will need to help one another. They will need to be able to answer questions like, *who has a generator. Who has access to clean water? Who's a nurse?*

They are important questions to answer. But they start with much easier questions, like *Want to join us for a barbecue? Or would you like me to look after your house when you're away this weekend?*

Tom calls this part of the Initiative: *Hi Neighbor.*

It's a program that was created to strengthen community bonds the old fashioned way — by encouraging neighbors to get know each other.

## **Kindness is giving a pass.**

If being kind has a chance of getting you in some hot water, Tom encourages people to err on the side of being kind. A favorite example: The men and women of City Hall - good people who's jobs sometimes force them to treat others, well, unkindly.

Tom is working to change that. So if a group of neighbors want to organize a parade for the kids, Tom encourages city employees to help make it happen rather than slow them down with paperwork and regulations.

After all, what's more important for the health of the city? Interwoven families who love the street they call home - or disjointed neighbors who can't cut through the red tape?

## **Kindness is unpredictable.**

One can never know the true effect of an act of kindness. And that's what makes it so special. An act of kindness today, no matter how small it may seem, has the potential of changing a day or an outcome or even a life in ways one could never know.

In 2014, while getting a haircut, Tom had a conversation with then sixth-grade student, Sean Oliu about kindness. From that spark, Sean now organizes an annual fundraiser where kids from all over Orange County perform downtown.

To date Sean's event has raised more than \$20,000 to purchase musical instruments for the schools. Someday, a former Anaheim student may perform on the stage of Carnegie Hall or the Hollywood Bowl thanks entirely to a series of kind acts.

### **Kindness is working in Anaheim.**

Tom sees his role as mayor in the City of Anaheim as similar to the role of a company CEO. His role is to put forth a vision and create the culture. The way to create a culture of Kindness is to talk about it - constantly - with everyone. Which is just what Tom has done.

"When people think about being from Anaheim," says Tom, "I want them to think of it not simply as a place where they live - but as a definition of who they are: members of a community of kindness—or the City of Kindness. Every time a citizen of Anaheim choose kindness over indifference, we are shifting the balance. When kindness prevails crime drops, senior neglect drops, bullying drops, unhappiness drops. Neighbors connect with neighbors, businesses connect with customers - and the city heals from within."

This movement that began with the poetry of a six-year-old girl has grown to encompass an entire city. And this is only just the beginning. It starts with each of you. It starts by being kind.

**The Kindness Initiative**  
*It starts by being kind.*