



Many ways to show gratitude on holiday

By Dawn Baumgartner Vaughan, The Herald-Sun
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DURHAM -- America has an entire day set aside for gratitude, but the reasons for giving thanks and the ways we do it are vast.

As we reflect on our blessings this Thanksgiving Day, Rachel Klem of Durham, who runs Common Ground Theatre, is thankful for the theater's volunteers.

"My goal is to tell them as much as I can how thankful I am -- in person, in e-mails, over the phone, with cards -- every way I can," she said. Klem said she is thankful to the community for supporting the efforts at the theater.

Pat Rust of Durham, a nurse recruiter at John Umstead Hospital in Butner, is thankful too.

"I'm grateful to God for having a loving family and friends and a job that I love," she said.

Anita Daniels of Durham County is also thankful to her relatives, who taught her to love family and trust God to give her a wonderful life, she said. The licensed social worker shows her gratitude by spending her days encouraging her clients, the women in her Sunday school class, her colleagues and her family when someone is discouraged or experiencing hard times, she said.

"I couldn't have selected a better life than the life I have today, and I wouldn't know just how privileged I am had I not been taught true faith and gratitude during the early days of my youth," Daniels said.

While gratitude is seen as a desirable trait -- parents begin early reminding their children to say thank you because it's good manners -- expressing appreciation can also be good for you.

San Francisco consultant M.J. Ryan has written several books about gratitude, the latest being "Giving Thanks: The Gifts of Gratitude." She said that expressing gratitude activates the parts of our brain that flood the body with feel-good hormones and over time boost the immune system.

Ryan describes the effect as a free anti-depressant. That happy feeling can come from saying thank you in person or at the dinner table, writing it down or even thinking about it while driving. Saying thank you induces the same feeling in someone else. When spreading those positive feelings around, it's best to be specific, she said.

"To the receiver, the more specific we are, the more it has an effect. Like with giving feedback at work, unless it is specific, it's not helpful," she said.

Much more than just manners, Ryan believes that the physiological effects of expressing thanks is a miracle.

"We think life has to be more complicated than this, but it's just that simple. And it's free. We just have to keep doing it," she said.

Jeffrey J. Froh, assistant professor of community psychology at Hofstra University in Hempstead, N.Y., researches early adolescent behavior. Data indicate that early adolescents in grateful moods tend to be more social, namely providing emotional support for others, he said.

When he worked as a school psychologist, he saw a student thank an art teacher for supplies not with a traditional thank-you card, but with a drawing. The student's expression of gratitude illustrates the creative pro-social behavior that gratitude can trigger, Froh said.

Youths and adults show gratitude differently, but given that it is a cognitively complex emotion, the reasons for expressing thanks differ. Youths say thank you because it is polite, while adults, Froh suggests, show thanks for several reasons.

While the words are the same -- "thank you" -- an adult is more likely to consider the intent, cost and benefit of the benefactor's behavior, he said.

Ryan thinks people tend to become more grateful as they age.

"As we get older, we tend to become more grateful because we recognize it's a miracle to be alive. Those who are younger take advantage and may still have a sense of entitlement," Ryan said.

It's not just humans that show gratitude. Apes remember favors and return them, said Frans de Waal, C.H. Candler professor of psychology at Emory University in Atlanta. He shared an anecdote of Wolfgang Kohler, a German pioneer of tool-use studies, who happened upon two chimpanzees shut out of their shelter during a storm.

"He opened the door for them," Waal said. "But instead of hurrying past him to enter the dry area, both chimps hugged the professor in a frenzy of satisfaction. This comes much closer to gratitude."

Around the country, many people observe Thanksgiving by sharing their bounty with others. Oxford United Methodist Church delivered more than 200 turkeys and side dishes to Area Congregations in Ministries, which distributes them to those in need. Oxford UMC's "Great Turkey Harvest" chairwoman Vickie Woodlief said that while the church donates to ACIM throughout the year, Thanksgiving reminds congregants of the blessings they tend to take for granted.

Woodlief said she is thankful for her husband, daughters, parents, friends, church family, job, health, Sunday school teacher and promise of salvation through Jesus.

"I try to show gratitude daily, but I know I often fail. Some ways are quite simple, such as just saying thank you, or letting the parents of my fifth-grade students know how much I appreciate their support at school," she said. Giving back to her community and trying to make a difference are other expressions she focuses on.

Ryan said Thanksgiving is great because it provides a national occasion when we stop and say what we're thankful for.

"Why not go around the dinner table and say thank you every day?" she asked.