

Welcome to Imagine a World: Nancy's Larks + Be Kind, an exhibit imagined and created by Maxine Hess + Jeanne Hewell-Chambers. Our first stop: The Minni Room.

There was a time long before you were born, in a certain part of the world where unkind people did mean, unkind things to people who were different from them. To people who needed help with certain things. To people with disabilities. People who talked, ate, moved, walked, held their heads differently, read books differently - people who did all kinds of everyday things in uncommon, unique ways.

The woman in the video, Minni, told Maxine - my artist friend and collaborator on this exhibit - a story about some people who formed an organization, a group, a club to be mean and unkind - to torment - disabled people. People with special needs.

The faces you see on the blue quilt - the Quilt of Shame - are some members of that club. Minni worked in the court where these men and women were tried for their unkind acts. The people you see on the yellow quilt - the Quilt of Innocence - are some of the people with disabilities who were treated unkindly by these men and their cohorts.

Many years after Minni told Maxine the story about these men and before I met Maxine, I learned about this club while watching a documentary, and right then a big, fat, crazy idea whooshed in, sat on my shoulder, and urged me to launch something called The 70273 Project. Ten days later, before I had time to think myself out of it, I published a blog post inviting people around the world to join me in commemorating the disabled people who were treated unkindly AND to promote kindness to all today and forever. A few years after that, Maxine found me at a meeting in Washington DC and told me about Minni and how, after hearing the horrible stories of unkindness committed by the men and woman in this club, Minni's life wish became not to go on a cruise or write a book or climb Mt. Everest, but simply for people everywhere to Be Kind.

See those 3 quilts with pairs of red X's? That's how those involved with The 70273 Project remembered the disabled people who were treated unkindly: we made quilts and quilt blocks with 2 red X's on a white fabric background.\* Why? The unkind people marked 2 red X's on paper to designate who to be mean to, and 66 years later, we began stitching 2 red X's on white fabric to say "We're sorry this happened to you, and we promise we will be kind to all people - including those with disabilities."

No amount of kindness or stitching can undo what those mean people did, but we can go forward in the world being kind and encouraging others to be kind, too.

Now let's move on to Stop #2, The 70273 Project Room.

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\* Note to Parents and Teachers:

I use past tense because we are no longer accepting blocks because all 70,273 people have been commemorated. There are however, still many opportunities to become involved. In February 2024, I placed the leadership baton in the hands of my good and amazing friend Peggy Thomas, who is leading The 70273 Project into its next chapters. We will always, of course, promote kindness to all and educate anybody who will listen about disabilities. If you're interested in hearing more or getting involved, please reach out to her: [Peggy@The70273Project.org](mailto:Peggy@The70273Project.org)

## Stop 2) The 70273 Project

Now you know that each pair of red X's symbolizes a disabled person who was treated unkindly, but in this room, I'd like you to look pick a pair of red X's and look at them closely. Are the red X's the same size or different? Can you tell what kind of fabric they are made from? Does the fabric look smooth or textured? Are the red X's narrow or wide, straight or slanted? Notice the shade of red, the stitching, how the red X's are attached, and think on this: Every stitch in every quilt in this room and every stitch in the more than 800 more quilts that wouldn't fit in here were sewn by kind people in more than 143 countries. Look at these red X's as art and notice how different each pair is from the others. This is true for people, too. It's true for the people who made these quilts, true for the people standing around you today, the people who go to school with you, people you play with, people you're related to. Every person - every single person - is differently beautiful in their own way. Every single person is a work of art.

Many of the kind people who made these blocks and quilts speak a language other than English. They may talk in ways you can't understand. Does that mean you can't communicate with them? Does that mean they aren't kind? Does that mean you shouldn't treat them with kindness? Does that mean they have nothing to say that you would find interesting?

When you're ready, let's go into the next room, the room I call Kindness, Route 1.

### Stop 3) Kindness, Route 1

Welcome to Kindness, Route 1! Take a moment to look around. Pay attention to what you notice, what questions bubble up, what you're curious and want to know more about. Make a note about those things for later, and now let's take a tour.

The first thing you probably notice is the Kindness Forest in the center of the room. Did you notice that the moss on the forest floor is a veritable cacophony of bright colors? Maxine and I gathered crocheted doilies and tablecloths from women we will never know, then Maxine dyed them to make our forest colorful. The trees were crocheted from all kinds of materials by Ann, a friend of Maxine's. Does the Kindness Forest make you smile? What do you notice when you gaze at the Kindness Forest? What do you feel as you stand in the presence of the Kindness Forest?

If you'll begin to the left of the door closest to the front of the building and follow the path around, the first quilt you'll see is a quilt Ms. Maxine and I made collaboratively to tell the story of our friendship.

[Please read the following artist statement for this quilt aloud and encourage the children underlined or circle words and phrases that leap out, begging them to think about them.]

### **POSTCARDS FROM A JOURNEY OF FRIENDSHIP**

Storied fabric.

Seasoned quilts.

Softly frayed edges.

These are just a few of our favorite things.

Kindness.

Women's issues.

Social justice.

Personal histories.

These are just a few of our shared interests.

We, like many others, discover our common threads through art, and more often than not, we use cloth to tell our stories and speak our truths.

"You, too?" If we had a nickel for every time we've said that, we'd buy all y'all lunch.

We're not carbon copies, yet even in our differences we find opportunities to rejoice, chortle, and learn. If that's not the mark of true friendship, please tell us what is.

Here's to the joys of an ever-unfolding friendship that began with a funny story at Sacred Threads 2019. Ask us to tell you that one some time.

Next the quilt with a white pinafore is one I made to tell the story of my disabled sister-in-law Nancy who was treated unkindly when she was 3 years old. Some people we don't know hurt her brain, making it hard for her to talk. I like to say that she has a vocabulary of about 12 words, and 6 of them are the word "love". It's a word she uses quite often.

Nancy lives in Florida, and one day when I visited her, we went to get hot fudge sundaes. When it took a while for the delectables to get to us, Nancy got fidgety. She is not good at waiting for ice cream or milkshakes! To give her something to do, I put pens and paper in front of her, and to my great surprise, she did something she'd never done before in all the decades I'd known her: she began drawing. She would make a mark on a page, then lift the pen to tell me it was time to turn the page. She filled my journal, then she made marks on napkins until the sundaes came. Seeing that she was communicating with me, I began stitching her drawings that very night. That was in 2012. Today, she still draws, and I still stitch her drawings.

That's what you'll see on the walls in this room. I tell different parts of Nancy's story in different fabrics and threads. Some are about her family because when someone is unkind to one person, they're also unkind to their parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters, friends, classmates, teachers, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Unkindness to one person is unkindness to many people. The good news is that when you're KIND to one person, you're also kind to their parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters, friends, classmates, teachers, aunt, uncles, and cousins. A little kindness goes a very long way!

The drawings stitched on the black orb are the third set of drawings Nancy made. Every time we visit Nancy, we leave paper and markers for her and bring back the drawings she's made since our last visit. I bring the drawings home, scan, format, and label the drawings, arrange them in digital folders, store the originals in page protectors in binders, then I begin to stitch. This black orb is the third piece in the series I call In Our Own Language.

See the purple stitchings on a white background? Those are Nancy's first marks she made at the restaurant that day. That's In Our Own Language 1.

Next is a triptych - 3 panels - of In Our Own Language 2. Those stitched drawings are sandwiched between sheer window curtains that once hung in my favorite Great Aunt Irene's living room. Aunt Rene loved Nancy, and whenever they were together, Aunt Rene would make her way to sit with Nancy, refusing to leave Nancy's side - even for cookies and ice cream. (Oh that didn't mean she didn't want the sweets. She just asked people to deliver plates filled with sweets to Nancy and her!)

This is how Nancy and I communicate now, you see. She draws, I stitch, we communicate - all without words. Through her drawings, she lets me know how she's feeling - if she's happy, sad, hungry. Can you find drawings that look happy? Sad? Mad? Frustrated? Sleepy?

She also lets me know what she's seeing. The blue panels displayed opposite In Our Own Language 3 (the black orb) are her 4th set of drawings stitched with pink and white thread. These drawings were made when we took her to Daytona Beach to spend a week with us. She spent the mornings on the hotel room balcony observing, and in the hot afternoons, she came inside the cool room to draw. Do you see the birds?

Nancy's birds may not look like birds, but they are still birds.

These trees crocheted by Ann, a friend of Maxine's, may not look like any trees you've ever seen, but they are still trees in our forest.

Nancy may not look or sound or eat or walk like anybody you've ever known, but she's still Nancy, a woman, a human being who deserves - and receives on a regular basis, I'm delighted to say - kindness.

So are each of you.

~~~~~ Parents and Teachers ~~~~~

Please linger as long as time permits. Revisit points of interest, ask questions, and before you leave, maybe purchase some raffle tickets and pick up a leaf, pen a sentence or two about a time you were treated with

kindness or a time you treated others with kindness, and drop it in our Kindness Box. From 4 to 6 p.m. on December 5, 2024, we will gather here for our Kindness Celebration, an evening of storytelling about kindness, including reading aloud the stories from our Kindness Box.