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LIVES ON LOVE

Greg Fischer, the mayor of Louisville, Kentucky, is trying to prove that compassion can heal political paralysis. The cynics think he's crazy. But what if he's right?

By Hugh Delehanty
Photographs by Mickie Winters

Left: More than 3,000 students were joined by businesspeople and citizens on a Compassion Walk during Louisville's annual Give-A-Day Week of Service, April 18-26, 2016.

Right: Each year YUM! Brands, headquartered in Louisville, sponsors a canned goods donation drive for the Dare to Care food bank as part of the week of service. Community members young and old pitch in.

Louisville mayor Greg Fischer was on his way to a bourbon festival in nearby Bardstown when he got the call.

Dr. Muhammad Babar, a prominent member of the Louisville Islamic Center, was disturbed to find the mosque he attends defaced with anti-Islamic graffiti. In response, Louisville Mayor Greg Fischer called on the community to help clean up the mosque, and more than 1,000 people from diverse backgrounds stepped forward to help.

It was from Dr. Muhammad Babar, a prominent member of the Louisville Islamic Center, who was disturbed because earlier that day vandals had defaced the mosque with bright red anti-Islamic graffiti: "This Is for France," "Nazis Speak Arabic," "Moslems Leave Jews Alone."

Some of the mosque's members wanted to do a quick paintover of the graffiti, but Fischer advised against it, saying that the city—and the Muslim community, in particular—needed a chance to heal. So the next day they held a press conference at the mosque and invited the whole city to participate in the cleanup.

The response was overwhelming. More than 1,000 people of all ages, races, and creeds showed up for the cleanup, backing up traffic for miles. "It was probably the most spiritual experience I've ever had," says Babar. "It still gives me goosebumps thinking about it. That's the feeling I wish humanity could always have."

For Fischer, it was a moment of confirmation. When he'd taken office three years earlier, he'd committed to making Louisville one of the most compassionate cities in the world. But he never expected something like this.

One of his inspirations was Thomas Merton, the famous Kentucky-based monk who'd had a life-changing epiphany in downtown Louisville in 1958. Watching shoppers pass by, he wrote, "I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness.... If only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun."

Those words rang true for Fischer that morning at the mosque. "There was this buzz of excitement in the crowd—you could feel it," he recalls. "The affirmations people were shouting back and forth were like waves that you hear at the beach. It was really something, like a cleansing. It was only later that I realized: Everyone there was shining like the sun."

Compassion wasn't the first thing on Fischer's mind when he ran for office in 2010 and eked out a slim victory over his Republican rival. But when he was preparing his inaugural address, he decided to set down his new vision for the city based on three core goals. Fischer, 58, is a →

PHOTOGRAPH (BOTTOM, RIGHT) BY BRIAN BOHANNON

When Louisville Mayor Greg Fischer began his tenure in 2010, he made compassion one of three core goals at the heart of his vision for the city, despite pushback from political advisors. He is pictured here in front of city hall.

IN THE COMMUNITY

Hands-On Helping

Compassion is a big, fancy word. But in a city, what it comes down to day-to-day is citizens taking time to care for one another.

Compassion has many faces. In Louisville, you can see them on the volunteers in the many civic groups the city encourages. You find them in the Kentucky Refugee Ministries, which was founded in 1990 and has since resettled more than 1,400 refugees. And you find them in the Give-A-Day program, Louisville's week-long nod to the power of service and giving.

Consider the alliance between the Refugee Ministries and the Pedal Power Project. "Offering refugees old, discarded, and unused bikes seemed like the perfect solution to help them travel to work and do shopping," says Robert Callander, the project's leader. When it started in 2013, the organization expected to donate about a hundred bikes before calling it quits. In April 2016, it topped 1,400. "As a bonus, bicycle recycling is a great way to reduce the trash in our landfills," adds Callander. He offers three reasons for Pedal Power's success: a generous giving community, which supports the project with a steady stream of used and unwanted bicycles; a group of 10 to 15 dedicated bike-repair volunteer members, who get together at least once a week to change tires and tubes, replace brake cables, and get old bikes up and running; and their partnership with the Refugee Ministries. "Their staff are incredibly professional," Callander says. "We simply fix the bicycles. They coordinate everything else."

A big part of the Give-A-Day program is connecting people: volunteers with projects, donors with needs. Jean Porter, deputy director of communications for the mayor's office, says an example from 2016—the program's five-year anniversary—is Family Scholar House, a local nonprofit that works to eliminate barriers for single-parent households. Volunteers from a local tech company called ComputerShare went to Family Scholar House one afternoon to paint, garden, clean up, and interact with the children in the program.

A key group that matches volunteers with existing community needs is REACH Corps. It identifies at-risk students and provides them with mentors who encourage them in a non-threatening environment. As part of Louisville's Give-A-Day Program, REACH sponsors a Build-a-Bed initiative that supplies a bed and essential bedding—as well as teddy bear, bedtime book, toothbrush, toothpaste, dental floss, and pajamas—to children who don't have one. "One family who got a bed simply broke out crying, out of happiness," says Raesean Bruce, a Build-a-Bed volunteer who is pictured above (far right) with fellow volunteers. Bruce serves as a home school coordinator for REACH Corps. "If you can believe it, they hadn't had a bed in over two years," he says.

thoughtful, unassuming executive with curly salt-and-pepper hair and a calm, intently focused presence who's passionate about pushing toward noble goals. According to his wife, Alex, an accomplished pediatrician, even when he's off-duty, Greg encourages their four kids to write down their aspirations every year and check with each other regularly on their progress.

The first two goals Fischer had in mind were no-brainers: 1) making Louisville a center for lifelong learning and 2) dramatically improving the city's physical, mental, and environmental health. For the third goal, he was searching for a way to connect with Louisville's long tradition of caring and hospitality, but neither of those words seemed to fit. Then Christy Brown, one of his longtime supporters, suggested using the word "compassion" and suddenly everything fell into place. That concept resonated with Fischer because, as he sees it, compassion "isn't just about having a sense of empathy. It's about having respect for all citizens so that their human potential can flourish and thrive."

Fischer's political advisors warned him it would make him appear weak, but that didn't deter him. He was convinced that Louisville, with its long history of interfaith collaboration and proud reputation as a progressive city in a conservative state, would be fertile ground for this kind of thinking. He also believed that, if it were fostered properly, compassion could play a key role in strengthening what he called the city's "social muscles."

Still, when Fischer delivered his address on a cold January day, even some of his closest allies were bewildered. "I turned to my wife and said, 'I can't believe he's doing this,' and it wasn't a compliment," recalls Dr. Jon Klein, a kidney specialist and longtime friend. "I'd been meditating for years and was in touch with all this stuff, but the political side of me thought he was squandering a big opportunity. But I totally missed the boat. When I finally got over my embarrassment, I realized this wasn't some kind of political flag-waving. It was a transformative act."

Few would disagree. Since taking office, Fischer has done a lot to transform this city that's often described as "too southern to be part of the North and too northern to part of the South." He's helped reduce unemployment, attracting more than 1,900 new businesses, and turning the area into a foodie tourist destination based on what he calls "Bourbonism." He's also won kudos for using advanced technology to solve difficult problems. But it's Fischer's emphasis on compassion that's changed the city's culture and made it a model of innovation worldwide. As Dr. Klein describes it, "You can go into a business setting now and talk about compassion and mindfulness. If I'd done that five years ago, people would have giggled. There's permission here to discuss things that aren't typically brought up in mid-sized cities in this part of the country. If that's drinking the Kool-Aid, so be it."

Compassion isn't just about feeling empathy for others, feeling their pain, Fischer says. It's about "having respect for all citizens, so their human potential can flourish and thrive."

On facing page: Louisville community members give their time to a number of projects to help citizens in need. Pictured here are volunteers for the Build-a-Bed initiative, which supplies a bed, bedding, a teddy bear, a bedtime book, pajamas, and dental care essentials to children in need.

Fischer's roots in compassion run deep. His father, George, grew up poor in Louisville's West End and rose to become CEO of a data-processing company and Kentucky's Secretary of the Cabinet. Once, when they were walking downtown, Fischer noticed his dad stop and chat with a shoeshine guy named Sam, who everybody else seemed to be ignoring. "I didn't think anything of it at the time," says Fischer, "but looking back it had a big impact on me. Without telling me, he was saying, 'Don't be too impressed with anyone. We're all the same.'"

His mother, Mary Lee, also inspired Fischer. Even though she was a busy housewife, she made time every Thursday to volunteer for Meals on Wheels and often talked about her experiences with her kid. Her unspoken message: If you can help somebody, do. Don't ask for anything in return. Just do it. "When you grow up around that," says Fischer, "it becomes who you are."

After graduating from Vanderbilt, Fischer saved enough money working at a salmon packing plant in Alaska to spend nine months traveling through Asia and Europe. Shortly after he arrived in Hong Kong, he had an epiphany of his own at a busy noodle shop. "It was hot and humid, and the steam was rising up from →

Left: Mayor Fischer joins volunteers at the Build-A-Bed program.

Right: The Compassion Walk is the highlight of Louisville's annual Week of Service.

the kitchen, when, all of a sudden, it struck me that I was really free," he recalls. "Nobody knew where I was. Nobody was dependent on me. I could take that ferry or that donkey cart and go wherever I wanted. It was the first time in my life when I felt this total sense of freedom."

The trip that followed helped Fischer "see the world in a global context. Everywhere I went you could see that people were the same, just trying to get through life and take care of their families."

When he returned, his family launched SerVend, selling ice-and-beverage dispensers worldwide, and he took over as president. After the company nearly went bankrupt a few times, Fischer started using Japanese management techniques, creating a high-performance organization based on giving his 300 employees a greater sense of ownership and a platform to realize their potential. Productivity tripled, profits soared, and average compensation rose more than 50%. More importantly, Fischer detected a "spark" in employees' eyes as they got more engaged.

At one point, Fischer asked his staffers to tell him how taking part in the company's growth had affected them personally. One production worker wrote that once she got fully involved in the system, her view of herself radically changed. Recalls Fischer: "She said, 'You have to understand: I grew up in a family where I was abused. If I came home from school with good grades, my father would beat me because he said he didn't want me to be better than him. But now I have wings and I can fly. My two girls are going to college and I never thought that was possible for someone like me before.'"

Fischer read that and started to weep.

Trying to instill the same kind of spirit into the metro area's nearly 760,000 residents wasn't going be easy. To be a successful mayor, Fischer says, "you have to have the head of a CEO and the heart of a social worker." In business, you can pick your own customers, he adds, but when you're a public official, you have to work with "the whole bell curve of humanity" and everybody is at a different point in the journey. "You're not going to flip a switch and have people automatically come along," he says. "You have to expose them to situations where they have some inner discovery. I battle every day with people not seeing each other as brothers and sisters. The best way to change that is to have them do something with each other. The reality in America is that most of us run in our own silos. But the true richness of life exists in the mosaic."

One of Fischer's first moves was to create a citywide day of service to give residents a chance to experience compassion firsthand. The event quickly grew into a weeklong Give-a-Day program, directed by compassion co-host Brenda Frank, and inspired the US Conference of Mayors to name Louisville the most livable large city in America in 2012. This year about 175,000 residents participated in the week's

activities, building beds for children, delivering bicycles to refugees, and packaging more than 44,000 meals for Kids Against Hunger. A touching moment came last year when Fischer arrived unannounced at the Academy of Shawnee and awarded volunteer Gabriele Shivers a trip to her senior prom. The gift included not only her prom fees, but also a sparkling-white sleeveless gown and a glam hairdo. "I was pretty that day," she says, "and I felt really loved."

In November 2011, Louisville became the seventh city in the world to adopt the international Charter for Compassion (see our Q&A with the Charter's founder Karen Armstrong, page 32) and made a 10-year commitment to build a community where compassion is an integral part of everyday life. The Charter's board has named Louisville its Model City of Compassion four years in a row, and Fischer's team has advised more than 40 cities worldwide on how to pick up their game.

Early on, Fischer challenged Seattle, the first adopter, to a competition to determine which city was more compassionate, based on volunteer statistics over a set period of time. It was mostly a tongue-in-cheek challenge. Fischer's team sent their rivals a bumper sticker that read: "Seattle Soon To Be the Louisville of the West," and when Seattle's team leader, Jon Ramer, came to town, Fischer's father, George, boasted, "We're going to whup your ass in compassion." As it turned out, that's exactly what the Louisville team did. But in the spirit of compassion, everybody agreed to call it a draw. That contest inspired Ramer to create the Compassion Games, an annual series of events involving more than 400,000 volunteers from 34 countries.

A key to Louisville's success has been the inclusive way the campaign has been structured. Rather than use a command-and-control model, Fischer and his team put together constellations of volunteers from a broad range of fields. "To lead this campaign, I've had to throw out my playbook of all the leadership tactics I've ever learned," says co-host Tom Williams, a respected attorney. "Compassion is generative, unlike the legal business, where one bad act often leads to another. This job is more like gardening than running a big corporation. We plant seeds of encouragement and good things happen."

So far, the campaign has attracted more than 100 organizations, ranging from UPS, Brown-Forman and Metro United Way to smaller groups such as ChooseWell, Global Game Changers, and the Center for Interfaith Relations. The campaign has also generated a number of innovative ideas, including:

- A coalition between Louisville Metro Corrections and other agencies to create a transition program that provides clothing, medication, bus tickets, emergency housing, and mental health assistance →

Left: On the last day of the Week of Service, volunteers prepared more than 500 disaster kits available for rapid use in emergencies.

Right: The Build-A-Bed project was started by Kentucky AmeriCorps, with support from nearly a dozen local companies.

to recently released inmates. The jail has also implemented a peer-counseling detox model for addicted inmates with help from a local organization, The Healing Place.

- Right Turn, a program that helps older teens who've had minor scrapes with the law set personal goals and put their lives back on track. Fischer has also authorized giving metro employees two paid hours a week to mentor at-risk youth.

- An initiative by the University of Louisville Medical School to train future doctors to provide more compassionate care. The city will also host a compassion training camp this fall for medical students from around the world.

A good example of the compassion in action is Spalding University. In 2011, Spalding's president, Tori Murden McClure, decided to make her school the nation's first university to adopt the Charter for Compassion before Stanford did so. "I wanted Spalding to beat Stanford at *something*," she says. "Then to my surprise, it took hold with our students in a way I never expected." A few years later, while attending an introductory program for first-year students, she recalls, "one of the sophomores said, 'We're a compassionate university and it's up to us to keep it that way.' You can't make that up, and you certainly can't dictate that from on high." In an attempt to quantify her students' dedication, McClure asked statisticians to calculate how many hours of public service the school's 2,500 students had done that year. The number was around one million, which seemed surprisingly high to McClure. So she asked them to redo it, and a few days later they returned and said, "We were wrong. It was 1.13 million."

One of the most promising efforts to grow out of the campaign is the Compassionate Schools Project, a partnership between Jefferson County Public Schools and the University of Virginia that emerged from a conversation between Fischer and the program's director, Owsley Brown III. The project, which began last fall in three pilot schools, is based on an integrated curriculum designed by UVA researchers that combines mindfulness, yoga, nutrition, and social and emotional learning. The plan is to expand the program over the next five years to 50 schools and 20,000 students, which, Brown says, will constitute the largest randomized study of its kind ever attempted.

COMPASSIONATE CITIES

I Left My Heart in...Fayetteville?

5 cities that are changing the face of politics.

ATLANTA, GA

Population: 463,878
Median household income: $46,439
Median age: 33

"The best way to change a community is to change the conversation," says Robert Thompson, one of the founders of Compassionate Atlanta. And that's been one of the campaign's primary goals since the city adopted the Charter in 2014. To that end, the group focuses a lot of its attention on convening neighborhood forums on racial diversity and other topics to raise awareness of the benefits of compassionate action.

Compassionate Atlanta has formed partnerships with more than 60 organizations, including Emory University, which has done extensive research on cognitive-based compassion training in conjunction with Tibetan academic institutions; the DeKalb Coral Group, a music society that performs in retirement homes and other locations; and the Community Assistance Center in Sandy Springs, which provides short-term assistance to residents in financial crisis.

AUSTIN, TX

Population: 926,426
Median household income: $58,458
Median age: 33

Dr. Lesa Walker was on a mission. Disenchanted with what was going on in the world, she left her job as a doctor and shifted to part-time work so she could spend two years performing positive acts every day. That eventually led her to launch the effort to make Austin a compassionate city, which came to fruition earlier this year.

Walker and her team designed Compassionate Austin as a grassroots movement because they wanted to attract everyone to engage in the campaign. They still have a ways to go, but the Austin area has fielded 29 teams to compete in the Compassion Games' Earth Week event, including the Discovery School's zero-waste initiative and the city's legendary Green Day Festival, which drew more than 10,000 participants.

"Compassion is the power source for innovation," Walker says. "Without that driving force, we're nowhere."

SOURCES: CENSUS.GOV; SEATTLE.GOV; AUSTINTEXAS.GOV; FAYETTEVILLE-AR.GOV

SEATTLE, WA

Population: 662,400
Median household income: $67,365
Median age: 36

It started with a bang. First came the Seeds of Change conference, featuring the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu, which attracted an estimated 154,000 in 2008. Two years later Seattle became the first city to affirm the Charter of Compassion, launching the compassionate cities movement worldwide. But after years of hard work the leaders of Compassionate Seattle concluded they were failing to engage the audience they needed to most: the city's underserved population. So in 2014 the organization decided to reboot. Thus was born the Call of Compassion NW, which extended its reach to include communities in Oregon, Idaho, Alaska, and other parts of Washington.

The Call focuses its energy on a clearly defined set of initiatives, including peer-counseling programs for young people in recovery, teaching personal empowerment skills in self-managed homeless shelters, and partnering with churches and organizations to convene tough discussions about racial equity. The campaign is also working on strengthening its relationship with the region's Muslim community, linking together organizations that are helping to build thriving neighborhoods, and connecting the dots between social justice and climate change.

FAYETTEVILLE, AR

Population: 80,614
Median household income: $38,680
Median age: 27

Compassionate Fayetteville competes regularly in the Compassion Games and recorded the highest number of charitable acts in the competition two years in row, in 2013 and '14. The campaign's feature event is the Month of Compassion, which this past March included an interfaith harmony day and compassionate dialogues on race relations and other issues.

ST. AUGUSTINE, FL

Population: 13,440
Median household income: $43,201
Median age: 42

This small coastal city in northeastern Florida signed the Charter for Compassion in 2013. Most recently, the campaign staged a creative rally to protest a billboard that had gone up in St. Augustine reading: "Islam Bloody Islam: Doomed By Its Own Doctrine!" Instead of getting into a clash with police as other protesters had done, the campaign's executive director, Caren Goldman, invited about 90 friends wearing bright red peace-symbol T-shirts to a compassionate demonstration underneath the billboard.

"To me, the purpose of our compassion work, particularly in the schools, is to create an open mind and an open heart," says Fischer. "When you're in that position of freedom, that's when you can learn the most. You can take in stimulus in a pure way and see how it impacts you. It's hard to do that when you have a narrow view of the world or your mind is cluttered."

That mission became clear during the after-math of the Trayvon Martin shooting in 2012. Many of Fischer's advisors thought he should ignore the issue, but he sensed it would be a good opportunity to bring community leaders together and start having a dialogue.

"That's where compassion has led us," says Sadiqa Reynolds, the head of Louisville's Urban League who was the city's chief of community building at the time. "The big thing is that those uncomfortable conversations have begun. So many people in our community are disconnected from the suffering of others. But Greg has given people permission to acknowledge the compassion inside themselves. And not just to *feel* compassion, but to *act* on it, as well."

In Reynolds' view, making that kind of dialogue a priority has helped protect Louisville from the kind of scrutiny other cities have faced during the post-Trayvon Martin era. It also made it easier for the city to deal emotionally with a brutal triple homicide that happened shortly afterward. During that crisis, several observers saw a different side of the mayor emerge. Fischer is known for being a reserved, unemotional speaker who, as one observer puts it, "is not the kind of guy who sees a fire and runs into it." But in the wake of that disturbing crime, he found a new more forceful voice as he proclaimed, "This cannot happen in our city."

Since then, Fischer has not been shy about speaking out on issues he feels strongly about, whether it's racial prejudice, same-sex marriage, or Donald Trump's call to ban Muslims from entering the country. "We're fighting for the soul of our country right now," says Fischer. "And one of the things I've learned is that we need to be louder. Being loud and compassion might seem like contradictory terms, but people have a natural desire for connection and belonging and they're not hearing a lot of leaders talking about that. So I focus on the basic human values of love, kindness, and compassion and no matter what the crowd, no matter what the racial or political makeup, they nod their heads in agreement. People want more of this." →

Above: Jason Aldabbi, right, and his brother Mohamad Eddin, playing on a bike in the hallway of their new home in Louisville. The Aldabbis fled Syria four years ago, and after living in refugee camps in Jordan finally arrived in the US with the help of the Kentucky Refugee Ministries.

On facing page: Raesean Bruce, pictured with his three-year-old daughter Braylin Sandors, volunteers with Build-a-Bed, and has witnessed the impact of Louisville's compassion campaign firsthand. "One family who got a bed simply broke out crying, out of happiness," he recalls. "If you can believe it, they hadn't had a bed in over two years."

That's all well and good, say Fischer's critics, but some wonder whether that message would be more appropriate coming from a pastor than a mayor. They also worry that he may be too closely aligned with business interests in the city to turn his call for compassion into effective public policy. Phillip Bailey, who covers metro government for the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, compares Fischer to New York City's former mayor and media mogul Michael Bloomberg. "He's shown consistently that he comes from a business background," says Bailey. "He doesn't believe in old school bread-and-butter liberalism. And many of the conflicts he's had on the left have been about what he would call 'efficiencies.'"

Bailey is quick to point out, however, that some of the resentment social justice advocates feel toward Fischer comes from the fact that he has hijacked one of their key talking points. "Because he's a public official," he says, "people expect him to do more than just talk about compassion, but to put it into policies, as well. I don't think Fischer doesn't care. I think he sees government from a business point of view."

Last year Fischer got caught in a firestorm over a proposed project to build an anaerobic biodigester in the West End. It sounded like a good idea. Not only would the project create jobs and convert waste into green energy, the developer, STAR BioEnergy, agreed to donate $5 million back into the community. But local residents, fearing the biodigester might explode, staged several protests and accused Fischer of caring more about a company from Indiana than his own constituents. In response, Fischer persuaded STAR BioEnergy to reconsider the project.

In Fischer's view, the process was successful because it got the community engaged. But he acknowledges that he needs to bridge the world of business and politics more effectively. "I'm about delivering good efficient services and helping people, but there's a louder public policy platform around that as well," he says. "Some politicians, that's all they do. My style is to get results by getting things done, instead of just shouting about it with no follow-up.

"Mayors have to deal with the way things are, and it's a major contact sport. You either like that or you don't. I find it really fascinating. The critical thing is to listen with an open mind and heart. Many people—especially the most disconnected and hopeless—aren't used to that. They're used to being judged and being seen as part of the problem. In my mind they're a big part of the solution—and the beauty of the city."

In the early days, Tori McClure remembers going to compassion campaign meetings and wondering which Greg Fischer was going to show up. "When he talked to volunteers," she says, "he would put on his soft and fluffy side. Then we'd go talk to business people and he'd put on his hard-nosed business hat." But now she believes "he's developed a compassionate core that has led him to take stands that previous mayors would never have taken."

Fischer isn't a formal meditator. But what's unique about him, says Owsley Brown III, "is his ability to listen to his heart in a big way. And he's sharing that journey practically every day with anybody who wants to pay attention."

So far, it's been an imperfect journey, as Fischer would be the first to admit. Still, one thing he's certain about is that he's done with being warm and fuzzy. "The biggest misconception people have about compassion is that it's nice and soft and liberal," he says. "What we're trying to do is to get everybody, individually and collectively, to reach their potential. That's the biggest challenge of all. If we can achieve that, all of those other problems we have will go by the wayside." ●

Hugh Delehanty is a former editor for *Sports Illustrated*, *People*, *Utne Reader*, and *AARP The Magazine* and the co-author with NBA coach Phil Jackson of the #1 *New York Times* bestseller *Eleven Rings*. He profiled NBA meditation coach George Mumford in the February 2016 issue of *Mindful*.

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