

The Power of Hello



HOWARD WHITE

I work at a company where there are about a gazillion employees. I can't say that I know them all by name, but I know my fair share of them. I think that almost all of them know me. I'd say that's the reason I've been able to go wherever it is I've made it to in this world. It's all based on one simple principle: I believe that every single person deserves to be acknowledged, however small or simple the greeting.

When I was about ten years old, I was walking down the street with my mother. She stopped to speak to Mr. Lee. I was busy trying to bull's-eye the O on the stop sign with a rock. I knew I could see Mr. Lee any old time around

the neighborhood, so I didn't pay any attention to him. After we passed Mr. Lee, my mother stopped me and said something that has stuck with me from that day until now. She said, "You let that be the last time you ever walk by somebody and not open up your mouth to speak, because even a dog can wag its tail when it passes you on the street." That phrase sounds simple, but it's been a guidepost for me and the foundation of who I am.

When you write an essay like this, you look in the mirror and see who you are and what makes up your character. I realized mine was cemented that day when I was ten years old. Even then, I started to see that when I spoke to someone, they spoke back. And that felt good.

It's not just something I believe in; it's become a way of life. I believe that every person deserves to feel someone acknowledge their presence, no matter how humble they may be or even how important.

At work, I always used to say hello to the founder of the company and ask him how our business was doing. But I also spoke to the people in the café and the people who cleaned the buildings and asked how their children were doing. After a few years of passing by the founder, I had the courage to ask him for a meeting. We had a great talk. At a certain point I asked him how far he thought I could go in his company. He said, "If you want to, you can get all the way to this seat."

I've become vice president, but that hasn't changed the way I approach people. I still follow my mother's advice. I speak to everyone I see, no matter where I am. I've learned that speaking to people creates a pathway into their world, and it lets them come into mine, too.

The day you speak to someone who has their head down but lifts it up and smiles, you realize how powerful it is just to open your mouth and say, "Hello."

Former University of Maryland point guard HOWARD WHITE is vice president of Jordan Brand at Nike. He founded Believe to Achieve, Nike's motivational program for youth, and he wrote a book by the same name. Mr. White lives with his wife, Donna, and his daughter, Mandy, in Lake Oswego, Oregon. He is proud to note that Mandy is a two-time All American at the University of Oregon.