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Thanks for the civility

Mannerly campaign spreads nationwide

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The rectangular green-and-white magnets seem to be everywhere in Howard County. Over doorways, on refrigerators, on file cabinets, on desks and, especially, on car bumpers, there they are, staring back politely with their simple message: "Choose Civility."

Few are suggesting that affluent, high-minded Howard County is particularly in need of a visit from Miss Manners - for heaven's sake, Columbia was explicitly built on values such as tolerance and respect for nature. But wealth is by no means a defense against discourtesy and, as the manners mavens point out, everyone could benefit from extra doses of civility at home, at work, at school, on athletic fields and on that notorious enemy of comity - the road.

With this in mind, the public library launched the civility campaign in February with a talk by P.M. Forni, a notably genteel Johns Hopkins professor who wrote the 2002 book *Choosing Civility: The Twenty-Five Rules of Considerate Conduct*. Since then, the library has distributed 17,500 magnets and purchased almost 2,000 copies of Forni's book.

Dozens of partners have joined the project, including the school district, which printed 30,000 civility-themed bookmarks and has its own slate of civility projects under way. Civility book groups have blossomed, along with a civility Facebook site, Web site and at least one blog.

Now, coming soon to bumpers in another place that's not exactly known as the seat of rudeness: Choose Civility in Montgomery County. Venice, Fla., recently saw the launch of a civility initiative called *Because It Matters*. In Cleveland Heights, Ohio, it's the *Civility Project*. In Duluth, Minn., it's *Speak Your Peace Civility Project*. All have precisely the same goal of pumping up the local courtesy quotient.

An uncivil person might ask: What the %\$#&* is up with the manners movement? Isn't that ... trivial? Goody-two-shoes-ish? Uptight? Redundant fluff?

Absolutely not, the propriety pushers will respond - gently and respectfully, of course. Civility and the civility programs cropping up in Maryland and around the country are about something far more profound than thank you and please.

Civility, they say, reduces the literal and figurative costs of stress and leads to greater productivity, better health and more happiness. And all it takes is following some Golden Rule-type steps, such as the ones Forni lays out in his book: Listen, think the best, speak kindly, refrain from idle complaints, apologize earnestly.

"To a large extent, the quality of our lives depends on the quality of our relationships, but the quality of our relationships depends on our relational skills. And good manners, civility and politeness are very effective, time-proven codes of relational skills," said Forni, whose book has become the mini-movement's essential manual. "It's not about which fork to choose for the salad, but it's about how we treat one another in everyday life, and what's more important than that?"

Organizers behind the cordiality boomlet suggest that people are yearning for another way in an overscheduled, speeded-up, stressed-out, self-absorbed, polarized society.

"People are stressed, and something's got to give where there's pressure, and what gives are the common courtesies," said Marjorie Floyd, whose organization, the Gulf Coast Community Foundation of Venice, started that region's civility campaign. "You don't give someone the benefit of the doubt because you don't have time. You don't let someone into your lane because you have to pick your own kid up from day care or you'll get fined."

Yet there's a rising awareness of the benefits of practicing civility, she said: "It's more difficult not to smile back at someone than to smile back. People are hard-wired to connect."

The coarsening of popular culture has contributed to the growing hunger for civility, said Diane Millett, the cofounder of the Cleveland Heights project. "It's the Don Imuses or the political debates in which people are uncivil or yelling at each other. It's TV or radio talk shows in which there's no real discourse going on, there's simply anger and disrespectful behavior. I think there's a certain level of being tired of that," she said.

Her local effort included the city, which revised the letters accompanying water and tax bills to make them nicer, and the school district, which hired a civility coordinator.

In Florida, organizers are launching a television advertising campaign, featuring a different celebrity and rule of civility each month. NFL Hall-of-Famer Lee Roy Selmon is "respect others." Photographer Clyde Butcher is "rediscover silence."

Montgomery County's new civility campaign, a collaborative, multipronged effort modeled on Howard County's program, will soon distribute its own magnets, bookmarks and posters. It is about to inaugurate a Web site where people can share stories about righteous acts of civility.

And in Howard County, the anti-rudeness effort continues to expand. A civility activities handbook and a spring forum are in the works. One high school might add Forni's book to the curriculum. If additional funding comes through, more magnets are on the way - for the rest of the 272,452 residents who didn't get one. The popular magnets, in some ways, lie at the heart of the endeavor.

"I drive down the road and see a bumper sticker, and it's a micro micro reminder," said Jessie Newburn of Columbia, who was so taken by the project that she started a civility blog. "It's an opportunity to make a micro choice to remember, 'Oh, yeah, I'm aligned with Choose Civility.' So if I go to the grocery store and someone's a twit, instead of my normal reaction - to be a twit back - in a split of a split of a second, I see the Choose Civility sticker in my head and make a different decision."

It's impossible to ascertain whether the programs work - how do you measure a community's civility? But Howard County's civility boosters cheerfully point out that awareness is higher and, at the very least, like Newburn, they notice changes in their own behavior. Many have caught themselves on the brink of ungraciousness - or worse - and edited out a honk, a fist shake, a cuss word.

"It causes you to take a breath before you react. As trite as it seems, it is a choice," said Carolyn Pilcher, a media specialist at Atholton High School who frequently finds herself citing Forni's rule No. 7 - "don't speak ill" - to her students.

Early on in the campaign, Kelli Shimabukuro - the library's community education coordinator and chairman of the program - found herself in a near-melee at a Little League game after her husband was accidentally popped in the head with a baseball bat. He swore, parents came running, tempers flared. She diplomatically tried to calm both sides, and it worked. Apologies went around; people returned to their seats.

"It makes you think twice about your actions," Shimabukuro said. "You can't be in the middle of something and drive away with a bumper sticker that says 'Choose Civility.'"

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