



Rochester

A Compassionate City from the Beginning

Written by Jorrie L. Johnson

Rochester's destiny to become a City of Compassion began nearly a century and a half ago when doctors William Worrall (W.W.) Mayo, his sons William and Charles, and the Sisters of St Francis came together to care for those injured in a devastating tornado (1883). As Mayo Clinic was established (1864) and grew with the Sisters' generous spirits, the culture of compassion evolved within the Clinic and the community.

COMPASSIONATE CITY MOMENTUM

In 2017, Rochester resident Catherine (Cathy) Ashton initiated a movement to get the City of Rochester designated as A City of Compassion. "Sister Marlys Jax arranged for Assisi Heights to be our home for listening sessions we held from (October) 2017 to 2020," explains Ashton. "We heard from people in government, public services, social services, religious and spiritual services, and those working in legal, protective, and justice services." The compassionate listeners probed those serving diverse people of all ages, ethnicities, economics, and faiths. They heard about the various needs of the community, including those experiencing homelessness, grief and loss, mental illness, and inequality.

In the listening sessions, participants were asked to share a personal story of what influenced them to bring compassion into their work serving the community and to tell how serving others awakens compassion in themselves, those they work with, and those they serve. They focused on what is needed to grow a culture of compassion as a binding force, and how their work supports the city (as a community) to realize this vision. They thought of ways to help create opportunities for meaningful multigenerational participation in compassionate actions.

They were reassured that no personal information would be shared from the listening sessions. This helped participants speak freely and allowed deeper conversations.

Common themes from the listening sessions surfaced. "Influence" was a theme that came from learning compassionate behavior from other people or from being a recipient of kindness and wanting to pay it forward. "Challenge of receiving support for doing the work" was repeatedly heard from participants. Participants shared the "bigger picture of what compassion offers." One participant expressed, "The importance of building listening skills to believe and affirm the reality of another's experience." The spirituality of compassion was also a recognized theme. "Compassion awakens empathy, wisdom, listening, caring, and courage through the vulnerability of doing the work," explained a participant.

"Our experience with giving individuals in our community an opportunity to tell their story of awakening to their own deep well of compassion, the hard work, the satisfaction, and also the joy that comes with carrying that forward has been life-affirming for them, as well as for our small group representing Compassionate Rochester, Minnesota," explains Ashton.

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Front (left to right) Sister Marlys Jax, Dr. Ashok Patel, and Cathy Ashton along with many of the Sisters of St. Francis and others at the signing of A City of Compassionate City resolution at the Government Center in 2017.

CITY OF COMPASSION DESIGNATION

In September 2017, Rochester’s City Council passed and adopted the resolution to designate the City of Rochester as A City of Compassion. The resolution stated, “Compassionate Rochester MN is a movement to raise awareness in our community of the benefits of compassionate actions to all who live work, or visit Rochester, Minnesota.” The resolution lists three areas of focus:

- Honoring and supporting compassionate thought and action already existing in our community
- Growing a culture of compassion as a binding force in our community
- Creating opportunities for meaningful multigenerational participation in compassionate actions.

As written, the City Council adopted to infuse compassion in its policies, procedures, and programming.

The City of Rochester website states, “Supporting this is the enlivening of understanding and practicing compassion from the inside out. We commit to the pursuit of this transformative work to enliven our connection to all.” How do we relate to our own and others’ suffering? The answer is to do our best to relieve suffering in our community and the world as individuals working together.

City of Compassion movement founders invited all who believed in compassion being a value in all areas of our lives to celebrate together at Assisi Heights. “Here we heard additional compassionate work being done with law enforcement, compassion studies and medicine,” shares Ashton.

SHARING STORIES OF COMPASSION

Compassionate Rochester held three forums bringing storytellers together. "Serving Seniors with Compassion" event was held at 125 Live in September 2023. “Serving Youth with Compassion” was held at Riverside Elementary School in February 2024 and “Stories Embracing Inclusion with Compassion" was offered at Rochester Area Foundation in April 2024.

Dr. Ashok Patel, a leader of A Compassionate City movement since its inception, continuously speaks and shows compassion through his service to others. In 2023 he accepted the nomination to serve as Rochesterfest 2024 chair, which he themed “Live Your Dream.” The board thought it would be fitting to live Dr. Patel’s dream of Rochester being a place of kindness and compassion for all by inviting Compassionate Rochester to host storytelling. On Tuesday, June 25th after Mayor Kim Norton read the Rochesterfest 2024 proclamation, community members gathered under the small tent to share their stories of compassion. The first story was shared by Randy Stocker, Rochesterfest’s incoming Executive Director. As people sat quietly, Randy told his personal story of loss and grief. He explained how people offered their support in his time of need. He wrote a book titled HUGS HELP about his experience. Sister Marlys Jax shared her life experiences serving people in need locally and globally. Others offered their experiences of being unwelcomed, homeless, hungry, or hurting and how people helped them.

“Cultivating our skills for deeper listening, caring presence, and compassionate service delivery remain vital for families and communities to flourish,” explains Patel.

The Compassionate Rochester Facebook group that started in 2017 remains active and is maintained by Paula Smith. She shares uplifting memes about compassion on the page. Upcoming Compassionate Rochester and community events are shared there.