Opening Doors

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The school district put in place an effective pregnancy prevention program, which was well-received by the students and parents. However, the teen pregnancy rate and school dropout rate stayed about the same because of teen pregnancies. In a school board meeting where board members considered what else they could do, an old rancher sat with his feet propped up on a chair. "I don't know what to do. It seems like when I was a kid everyone in town knew us, called us by name, and sort of hooked into our lives. People were real back then, and these problems weren't very common. Maybe we should get to know these kids."

Others reminisced about their earlier days, and then someone came up with an idea: "Let's hold a town meeting. That wouldn't be hard. Let's ask every adult in town to learn the names of every kid. Let's greet them every time we see them and get to know them." It seemed like an overwhelming idea, but they decided to give it a try. The town meeting was held, the idea presented, and the plan was put into place.

When Old Abe saw a kid at the store, he stopped for a second and asked their name: "Hey, I've seen you around but don't know what to call you. What's your name?"

"My name is Mike."

"Nice to know you, Mike," Abe responded. "Call me Abe."

So after that it was, "Hi, Mike."

"Hi, Abe."

One afternoon Abe came out of the hardware store, and there stood Mike with a beer can in his hand. Abe said, "Hi, Mike." Mike quickly put the beer can behind his back. He didn't know why but he felt nervous holding a beer with Abe looking at him. Mike was uncomfortable, and Abe could tell. Something had happened. Just by learning Mike's name a relationship had started. With that relationship came a little bit of commitment. Mike didn't want to disappoint Abe—he seemed so nice. Abe didn't call Mike on having a beer; he actually didn't say a thing. He simply smiled, as always, and went on with his business.

Several months after the town started their effort to learn the local kids' names, another school board meeting was held. There was an enthusiastic buzz in the room. People couldn't wait to tell their stories, and everyone in the room seemed to have one. People told of the relationships they had developed with the teens in town that started by just learning their names.

Our names, for whatever the reason our parents chose them, are important to us. Babies tune in to the sound of their name by four-and-a-half months. This shouldn't be too surprising, as it's often the most frequent sound they hear. Researcher Hirsh-Pasek says, "In natural speech with children, we use the name as a wedge." It's much the same when you travel to a different country. You choose words that are wedges for you—you recognize the word and then figure out the words around it.

Learning the names of the children and youth in our lives can also be likened to a wedge, one that opens doors to relationships and ultimately marks a pathway to the Savior.

Susan Murray is a professor emeritus of behavioral sciences at Andrews University, and she is a certified family life educator and a licensed marriage and family therapist.

Note from author: Yes, eventually, there were fewer pregnancies and dropouts, and the numbers of arrests for drug use also decreased in that town. Thanks to Gary Hopkins, M.D., Dr.P.H., for sharing this true story with me.