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What legacy are we passing to the future?

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Legacy was on my mind earlier this month as I watched my son graduate from Junior Kindergarten. That celebratory event and seeing all that he and his classmates learned over the course of the year caused me to reflect on the lessons we pass on to the next generation. Children don't just learn in school; they observe and learn from our actions. So, what will they learn from us?

I recently rewatched “42,” the movie about Jackie Robinson, starring the late, great Chadwick Boseman. [One scene continues to stick with me every time I watch](#). It’s a scene where a father and son are at a Dodgers game. They share an excited exchange with the son wondering how well Pee Wee Reese will play that day and the father sharing his recollection of watching Honus Wagner when he was younger. You feel like this is going to be a heartwarming moment, except for what comes next. As Jackie Robinson takes the field, the father begins to shout racial slurs. The son looks like he doesn’t know what to do. You can see the pain in his expression. Then, he joins his father in shouting the same slurs.

We are living in a time where it feels like we’re in that scene from “42,” with division and hate seeming to get worse every day. As Pride Month comes to an end, let’s zoom in just on the LGBTQ+ community for a moment. The Trevor Project’s most recent survey on the [mental health of LGBTQ+ young people](#) found 39% seriously contemplated attempting suicide in the past year. Part of that comes from cruelty and discrimination they experience that was learned from others, and is being enshrined in law in many states. According to Lambda Legal, [more than 500 anti-LGBTQ+ bills](#) were introduced in state legislatures last year, with 84 being passed and signed into law. So far this year, the ACLU is [tracking another 522 bills](#), with 39 having been signed into law.

On the opposite side of this dynamic is part of [Jonathan Groff’s speech](#) when he won his first Tony Award last Sunday. In thanking his family, he said, “Even if they didn’t always understand me, my family knew the life-saving power of fanning the flame of a young person’s passions without judgment. I walk through life with an open heart because you let me know that I could.” That is the kind of legacy to aspire to, one where our children feel supported—no matter where their lives take them.

My family legacy is one intertwined with the nonprofit sector. My father coached my brother and me in the local nonprofit youth basketball league. My mother volunteered with any free time she had, including starting my career in nonprofits by bringing me with her to be part of book sales for the local nonprofit Friends of the Library. They both instilled in me the desire to be part of a community that makes others’ lives better. It’s a legacy I share with my son, teaching him the importance of giving back and bringing him along with me to learn about the importance of participating in our democracy through a local nonprofit that I serve on the board of.

Children observe and learn from our actions. Do we teach them hate or to walk through life with an open heart?

As someone connected to nonprofits, whether as staff, a board member, a volunteer, or a supporter, you are already part of creating a positive legacy. Nonprofits can be refuges, and places free of judgment. Nonprofits are where it doesn't matter who you vote for, the color of your skin, your gender identity, who you love, or what religion—if any—you observe. We all come together with a shared mission of helping others.

Let our children get to see and take part in that positive example. Let that shared common ground continue to be the legacy of the nonprofit sector. Let's all work to ensure the next generation walks through life with an open heart.

Rick Cohen is Chief Communications Officer and Chief Operating Officer for the National Council of Nonprofits. He also serves as co-chair of The Civic Circle, a nonprofit that brings democracy and civic learning alive for young children with music and drama shared in performances and after-school programs.