



Finding our way
to God through smiles



Contributed photo

John Schlimm of St. Marys is pictured at the installation of his SMILE participatory art mural at The Westmoreland Museum of American Art in Greensburg, Pennsylvania.

THE SMILE THAT CHANGED THE WORLD (is yours)

In 2014, I created a participatory art mural installation titled THE SMILE THAT CHANGED THE WORLD (is yours). A long canvas filled with circles and dotted eyes, I invite participants to choose their favorite colors and add their smiles.

The message: simple gestures, such as smiling, can make your home, school, work, community, and the world a better place. Or, as my dad says, “The quickest way to make a friend is to smile at a stranger.”

THE SMILE and I have traveled cross-country — Iowa, Washington, D.C., Sandy Hook Elementary School (site of the

BY JOHN SCHLIMM

horrific 2012 mass shooting), and The Westmoreland Museum of American Art. I've witnessed joy, reflection and letting go. I realized the power of lines and paint — of creativity — to bring people together; and to provide spaces where folks can rejoice or release whatever they're holding onto in order to let the light back in.

This journey grew into my work as a mental health advocate. My career paths as author, artist and educator provide me with unique platforms to encourage people of all ages to think about their smiles, feelings and brain — that mysterious three-pound organ in our heads. These experiences opened doors for me to sit down with mental health experts across the country and learn from them.

Two of my newest national public art works are The Smile Zine and The Brain Zine — images of the brain



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and one question: "How often do you think about your brain?" These projects are my way of advocating, and contributing, with the gifts I've been given in this life. I'm also co-creator of The Kindness Rocks & Smiles Community Project with Megan Murphy, founder of The Kindness Rocks Project. Our KRS Community Art Murals have been installed throughout the U.S., and as far away as Kenya.

My own lifelong struggle with anxiety is a platform of experience from which I can speak, as is the fact that the Straub side of my family tree has endured five suicides across three generations and ripples of generational trauma. A former student recently died by sui-

cide, as has one of my greatest mentors, renowned country singer Naomi Judd, for whom I was once a publicist in Nashville.

My work with Generation Z — people born between 1997 and 2012 — taught me the courage and unprecedented impact these young people are having in speaking aloud words like "anxiety," "depression," "suicide," and "I need help." They've emboldened my public voice where once stigma and trauma triggers stifled it.

We each have gifts and talents, we face joys and sorrows — all are platforms from which to help others.

If you're searching for direction or a mission-driven platform, I suggest you start by simply smiling, and then watch what happens. †

John Schlimm, a lifelong Catholic from St. Marys, is a Harvard-trained educator, artist, advocate, and the author of such books as *What Would Gen-Z Do?* and *The Star Jumped Over the Moon*. For more information about his work, visit www.JohnSchlimm.com.

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