

# 'It's Always the Right Time to do the Right Thing'

**Neil Willenson**, founder of One Heartland, emphasizes the importance of helping others and teaching good character



**"You can ace the ACT but it doesn't mean anything if you don't have a moral compass."**

**W**hen Neil Willenson was 22, he befriended a little boy who changed his life. Home from college, Willenson learned about a boy named Nile who was facing adversity at a local school because he had HIV.

Some parents, afraid for their own children's safety, demanded that Nile be removed from the classroom and use a separate bathroom. Many parents didn't understand HIV/AIDS and were afraid of people with the virus.

Willenson visited Nile and quickly saw he was like any other

child — he liked the Teenage Ninja Mutant Turtles and he just wanted to be able to go to school like any normal kid. Over the course of two years, Willenson became friends with Nile and saw some of the prejudice and ignorance that Nile faced. At some point, Willenson got the idea to create a camp where children with HIV/AIDS or affected by the virus could have fun and just be normal kids.

"I thought maybe by creating a camp, like Camp Heartland, maybe we could bring them some joy,"

Willenson said.

Camp Heartland was born and today, now known as One Heartland, it has locations across the country and has helped thousands of young people and their families challenged by HIV/AIDS.

Willenson said he has learned that nothing is more important than helping and serving others.

"You can ace the ACT but it doesn't mean anything if you don't have a moral compass," he said. "If you don't have compassion for your fellow man, it leads to an empty life."

He encouraged school board members and school administrators to evaluate their communities and see where they can help. He challenged them to hold a day of caring or service in their schools or, even better, make character education a fixture of the school culture.

"Find your cause for both you and your students," Willenson said. "Once you find your cause, take action. It's always the right time to do the right thing." ■



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