

## Random Acts of Kindness and Paying it Forward in Seven Hills

We get thousands of visitors to our stores every single day, but one recent shopper's story inspired our Seven Hills, Ohio store team and brought joy to Cleveland-area families.

Ten years ago, Comedian Ricky Smith was recently divorced, mentally exhausted and only had \$20 left to his name. Raised in Ohio, he was living in Los Angeles and needed a new start. He decided to take his last \$20 and use it to buy four pizzas to feed a group of people experiencing homelessness in a nearby park.

"Instead of being depressed, I decided to be a blessing to others," he said. "You can't be mad while you're eating pizza."

That experience, which he said led to good conversation and laughs, is just the beginning of his story. He turned the idea, which spread rapidly on social media, into a non-profit organization, called [Random Acts of Kindness Everywhere \(R.A.K.E.\)](#). R.A.K.E. is now a registered 501(c)(3) and has more than 5,000 volunteers across the country, including several famous athletes and actors.

Now, once a month, Ricky packs 1,000 lunches for families around Cleveland who need them. He's been in a McDonalds campaign, on the Drew Barrymore Show and been named "Activist of the Year" multiple times by Cleveland's SCENE Magazine. He learned to DJ during the pandemic, and hosts proms at senior citizen homes. And during the holidays, he shops for upwards of 150 families, picking out special toys for each child.

His generous holiday shopping led him to visit to a Meijer store this December, with a local news crew from WKYC-TV, to purchase gifts for local Cleveland-area families. When the news crew reached out to ask if they could film the shopping trip in our Seven Hills supercenter, Store Director Sheila Dowgiert not only agreed but offered to donate a \$500 gift card so Ricky could purchase some additional gifts during his trip.

"That day was my first visit to a Meijer store ever, and I loved the spirit of the team members. It felt like a really warm and welcoming place," Ricky said. "I was amazed by the selection in the store, and I was so glad to learn that Meijer is a family company that cares so much about the communities it serves."

True to R.A.K.E.'s name, Ricky kept it random on his first store visit with news station WKYC. When he learned that the station and Meijer were both contributing to his trip, he found a way to spread more joy in the store that day by handing out some of the station's donated cash to strangers.

A week later, Ricky rented a U-Haul and returned, filling seven carts on a holiday shopping spree for more than 100 Cleveland families who wouldn't have had gifts without his generosity.

R.A.K.E.'s mission goes beyond just doing random acts of kindness. Much like our mission at Meijer to enrich lives in the communities we serve, Ricky encourages his followers to not only make someone smile, but to enrich the lives of others and pay it forward. So how does that "pay it forward" part happen?

Just a couple weeks later, a Meijer store team member who was touched by Ricky's kindness that first day had a customer at her check lane with more groceries than he could afford. After everything was scanned, the customer apologized and said he'd need to put a few things back. But that team member, who'd been moved by Ricky's generosity, told him not to worry about it, then quickly came around to the other side of the lane, and took care of the rest of the shopper's balance.


Our cashier didn't tell anyone what she'd done, just quietly continued her shift. But another customer called to tell our store leadership about his kindness that day, to make sure that Sheila and her team knew what an amazing person they had working in the store.

"I didn't do it for recognition," she said, when asked why he didn't let anyone know what happened. "I just wanted to help."

As for Ricky himself, he continues to spread his infectious joy and kindness wherever he goes and stay incredibly humble despite all the publicity he's garnered around R.A.K.E.'s good deeds. When we called him to get details for this story, he ended the phone conversation with, "Is there anything I can do to help you? I'll do whatever I can. Just let me know."

Learn more about Ricky's story and how you can be a part of it at [rakenow.org](https://rakenow.org).

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Additional assets available online:  [Photos](#) <sup>(2)</sup>

<https://meijercommunity.com/Random-Acts-of-Kindness-and-Paying-it-Forward-in-Seven-Hills>