Racism: If I hear people making racist jokes, then I can ask them to stop.

Homophobia: If I hear any homophobic comments, then I will ask why does it matter to them?

Playful Joking: If I see another person physically harassing someone else, then I will speak up and protect the victim.

Sexism: If I hear a sexist comment, then I will step and in and say how would that feel if that was you?

As I enter American High School I walk past these student-generated anti-bullying posters cascading under a sign reading “No Room for Hate,” and, on many mornings, I hear Craig’s warm laugh echo down the hallways, well before he comes into view. Most days, Craig, a forty-something Black man, and one of two security staff at American High, greets students, staff, and me from his perch on the edge of one of two large planters in a blue-locker-lined lounge at the heart of the school.¹ His greetings reverberate through the cavernous cement-floored space, a high-ceilinged interior courtyard lit by filtered sun entering through multiple skylights. The vast majority of students pass through here several times per day as they head to their classes, grab a drink from the “coffee bar” located in a repurposed utility closet, wrangle a snack from the occasionally working vending
machines, or socialize with friends at the cluster of blue metal tables bolted to the floor under red, white, and blue banners hanging from the ceiling exhorting students to display “Eagle Pride.” In front of Craig sits his table, typically covered with flyers for events of interest to students, markers, snacks, and paper on which to color.

The second member of American High’s security team, Little J, a forty-something man of Polynesian descent easily recognized by his trademark sun visor, so-nicknamed because he was most certainly not little, could usually be found standing next to Craig and his table. Most mornings, they welcome students by their nicknames with greetings like “Hey, Fifi!” and “Good morning, Lulu!” and “Have a good weekend, French Fry?” On this particular morning, Craig asked a set of students if they had their permission slips for the upcoming Black Leadership Conference. He hollered in a fatherly way at another student, “Get me your essay!” referring to a written reflection on the Town Hall on Institutionalized Racism he had chaperoned the previous week. As the bell rang to signal the start of class time, Little J gruffly urged students to get to class, saying, “Why you breathing my air? Get out of here and back to class!” Students laughed and rolled their eyes but also heeded his warning and began to walk toward the classroom-lined hallways that spoke off the lounge.

One of the students making her way to class was Anna, a popular Black senior with long braids and striking blue-green eyes. Craig called out to her: “You know what I’m going to ask you?” “Where’s your essay?” she responded, rolling her eyes. “Yes!” Craig laughed, while Anna launched into an explanation of why she did not have the essay—she overslept and rushed to school and now her pants were wet because her bike seat was cracked and it rained the night before.

Craig called over Tilly, a soft-spoken White teacher, who suggested Anna cover her seat with a plastic bag, telling her to bring her pants to the “yoga room” where they could put the clothing in a dryer. Moments later Madison approached, a diminutive White student
with shoulder-length blond hair tucked into a baseball cap, holding back tears as she explained to Craig that she had been kicked out of her house again last night. First, to ensure that Madison was fed, Craig dipped into the food stash of instant noodles and granola bars he and Little J fund with their own money. Then he spent a few minutes connecting her with staff who could help solve her housing challenges. After getting Madison settled, Craig turned to me, saying, “Students just want connection.” Then motioning toward the hallway down which Madison exited, “She wants connection.” His goal is “to connect with students,” providing “wraparound services, you know, where we wrap around the students” moving his arms into a symbolic circle of care. Young folks at American, for all their eye rolling, feel this care deeply. As Cassia, a soft-spoken junior and president of the Black Student Union, told me of Craig, “He does so much more than what a security guard does. He connects with every single one of us,” a sentiment echoed by many of the students at the school.

American High is just that kind of school, the kind of school where there is “no room for hate,” the kind of school where care, connection, and kindness characterize school culture. At every turn I see manifestations of this kindness and care. Students, for instance, recently founded a “Be Nice Club” to promote kindness and inclusivity. On Valentine’s Day, cheerleaders plastered the blue lockers with white notes dotted with black hearts reading “Have a wonderful day!” and “You are an amazing person!” In the girls’ bathroom, a cacophony of student-generated affirmations fills a large yellow piece of butcher paper. Under the heading “Write Something Positive Today,” students scrawled messages like “You look very nice today!” and “You are perfect just the way you are. Never change.” This culture of kindness extends beyond American High to the surrounding town of Evergreen where “Be Nice” signs, part of a town-wide kindness campaign, dot front lawns of the modest ranch-style homes and duplexes surrounding the school.
Given this culture of kindness, it’s little surprise that when community members talk about American High, they call it a “special place.” Lauren, a White senior, describes American as full of “the sweetest people in the world.” Leila, a White junior, says, “Students would burn everybody alive if they were, like, mean. American is so defensive of each other. Everyone stands up for each other. I think it’s awesome. It’s, like, oh, you’re homophobic, that’s not cool. You’re a bully, that’s not cool.” Devin, another White student, describes American as full of “violently accepting people.” As Emily, a White mom of an American High student, says, folks at American will “accept the bejeesus out of you.” Many folks I talk to readily contrast this culture of kindness at American with the aggressive and competitive ethos of the more well-resourced school up the road, Timber High, where young folks are, reportedly, “bullied out.” This culture of kindness and acceptance among students and staff creates the sort of school that students want to come back to even after they graduate. In fact, when meeting with the seniors to prepare them for graduation, Principal Walt, a fifty-something balding White man with an easy laugh who frequently sports jaunty multicolored bow ties as he strolls through the school, warned the students that even if they miss the staff, “you can’t just come in and hang out with your teachers” after graduation. After spending two years in the classrooms, hallways, auditoriums, and bleachers at American High, it is abundantly clear to me why so many students want to return to hang out for a bit with their teachers: the sense of kindness and acceptance makes American a space that’s hard to leave.

What American High may lack in terms of financial resources, it more than makes up for with this community. While something like a “yoga room” (where Anna’s clothing ended up in the drier) feels quite fancy, the sort of thing one would find at a wealthy White suburban school, American High is decidedly not fancy. In fact during my time there, I saw a lot of extra classrooms that could be used
creatively, because so many students “choice out” of American to attend other, more well-resourced, higher-performing high schools. Unlike these other schools, the parking lot at American is full of older, noticeably used cars, not the new SUVs or expensive electric cars of Timber High. Roughly 50 percent of the students at American High qualify for free or reduced lunch, a rate that is double that of the two other area schools—Timber and Valley High Schools.

When people say a school has heart, they mean a place like American, a place where resources are not exactly scarce, but they aren’t exactly abundant either. What it does have is kindness and acceptance. As a sociologist who had spent the better part of the previous two decades documenting gender- and sexuality-based bullying and harassment, I realized with surprised relief that this kindness and acceptance extended far beyond signs at the front of the school or Craig’s nicknames. It permeated classrooms, social interactions, and young people’s relationships with each other. But, as I came to discover during my time at American High, this kindness and acceptance had limits, limits that became clear when students and staff took stands against systemic racism, when young folks demanded safer schools and inclusive mental health care, when girls grappled with gendered inequalities, and when long-standing rituals shifted in attempts to be more inclusive. These limits, limits that are at the heart of this book, came as a surprise given the care expressed by so many at American, care that, perhaps, helps us understand why so many students want to return for a visit after they graduate.

Take Ms. Bay’s class, for instance. I spent multiple mornings each week in her cheery, light-filled biology classroom at the end of A Hall. Jars of animal specimens sit on the shelves spanning the side walls, and colorful posters of marine life paper the remaining wall space. Unlike the windowless classrooms that spoke off most hallways at American, windows line the back wall of Ms. Bay’s room, allowing the sun to shine in on students who sit clustered around black lab
tables. A White forty-something woman with long, brown wavy hair, a wicked sense of humor, and a penchant for sprinkling eighties pop culture references throughout her lessons, Ms. Bay is much more than a biology teacher. Hailing from a working-class background in rural Idaho, Ms. Bay is a popular mentor and role model for many of her first-generation and working-class students. Along with her lip-sync partner, Craig, she regularly wins the staff lip-sync competition at quarterly all-school assemblies. Most recently she and Craig brought down the house with an epic performance of Jay-Z and Alicia Keys’s “Empire State of Mind.” She teaches the UPWARD class, a class designed in a cohort model that, over the course of four years, prepares a group of mostly first-generation and underrepresented students in college readiness. Rather than focusing on a particular topic, the UPWARD class emphasizes study skills as well as peer feedback and peer tutoring.

Ms. Bay spends much of her time demystifying the journey to and through college for her students. Because I had been a university professor for a little over a decade, Ms. Bay regularly called on me in class to help explain the college-going experience regarding everything from note-taking practices to financial aid processes. Sometimes I was able to help, like when I spoke with the class about how to choose a major or the differences between liberal arts colleges and research universities. Other times, my advice highlighted a distance between university and high school classrooms. For instance, despite Ms. Bay’s requirement that her students take and turn in Cornell notes, at one point I had to admit that I had no idea what those were and certainly didn’t require them as a college professor, an admission that led to righteous indignance and laughter on the part of the students and a joking glare from Ms. Bay. When the young folks in class had questions about college, I did my best to point them to the correct office or find an email they could contact at the appropriate university so they might get their specific query addressed.
As part of her goal to demystify the college-going process, Ms. Bay invited back former UPWARD students Ethan, Harper, and Jaxon to share their post–high school experiences as first-generation and working-class students. As the three of them stood in front of the twenty-five current UPWARD students clustered around black lab tables, Harper, a White college sophomore wearing a trans pride shirt, said, “College is not that easy . . .,” and detailed the financial challenges they had experienced as a self-supporting student at a local public university, sharing that they were considering taking some time off to pay down college loans before finishing their degree. Ethan, a Latino student who was in the midst of transferring to a four-year state school from the local community college, laughingly reassured the UPWARD students that even though college is hard, “graduating from high school is the best.”2 Jaxon, a Filipino senior who attended a local private university on a track scholarship after losing his housing, living in his car, and dropping out of a large state university, laughingly shared with the UPWARD class that being an adult means that “you can eat all the ice cream you want but you have to buy all the ice cream.” After an hour of tips and tricks about how to succeed after high school, the three concluded their advice with appreciation for Ms. Bay. Jaxon said, “Ms. Bay is amazing!” Referring to their annual trip to a local fun center, Harper laughed, “She’s the Bay-inator when we played laser tag!” Ethan advised the class that after they graduate, they need to “check on Ms. Bay. Man, she’s awesome. She loves you guys in a weird nonpsychotic way. You’re her children.” Jaxon chided them, asking, “Did you remember her birthday?” The current UPWARD students eagerly answered, clamoring over each other to be heard. Joss shouted out, “We did on Facebook!” while Rayna announced, “We got her a shark sweater!” The class members laughed proudly because those marine predators are Ms. Bay’s favorite animal by far, a fact that students frequently leveraged when making jokes or getting her presents.
Teachers throughout American High demonstrated a similar, in Ethan’s words, “weird nonpsychotic love” for their students, love that manifests as care around issues of class, gender, sexuality, and racial inequalities. Over in the J hallway, for instance, sits Coach Ted’s Human Sexuality classroom. Coach Ted’s classroom is the opposite of Ms. Bay’s. Rather than vibrating with the living nature of science, it feels like a shell of a classroom, the walls bare of décor save for a hastily pinned-up football picture. So many desks and chairs crowd the room that most days I have to physically move them in order to find a seat for myself. Coach Ted, the thirty-something White football coach at American, with close-cropped blond hair, dressed as usual in oversized shorts and a T-shirt that hangs off his small frame, told me that he and his wife, also a teacher, live only a few blocks from the school because they are “work-a-holics.” He bragged that he could bike to school in “two minutes” and bike home for a nap between teaching and football practice. Both he and his wife, he told me, come from “football families,” sharing that she has never missed a game of his. “It’s part of the deal,” he said. “She’s at a football game every fall Friday night of her life. The relationship wouldn’t work otherwise.”

According to Coach Ted, he teaches the Human Sexuality class not because he has specific training in it, but he has the “EQ” or “emotional intelligence” to do so. I frequently watch Coach Ted’s “EQ” in action as I sit next to Craig on his planter. Coach Ted regularly stops young men in the hallway to ask why they missed football practice, quickly strategizing to solve whatever problem the player had encountered that prevented them from attending, whether it be financial stress, transportation problems, family issues, or academic struggles. While it might be tempting to think that his football players were the only recipients of this sort of care, Coach Ted regularly solved similar problems for non–football playing young folks at American. For instance, when he overheard a group of students in his