

# The wisdom of waving

By Janine Weisman | Mercury | Twitter: @j9weisman | Posted: Wednesday, June 3, 2015 9:00 am

Chimpanzees wave their hands at each other so you can safely assume that the earliest human beings did so too. It's how we acknowledge another person, especially when they are out of earshot or do not speak the same language.

A gesture so important for connecting in a civilized society is also key to survival. And not just because it facilitates communication essential to life in social networks. But because it can keep you from stepping off the curb into oncoming traffic.

The streets would be so much safer if more people engaged in the wave. That's the simple concept behind Newport Waves, a citywide public awareness initiative launching this summer to encourage motorists, bicyclists and pedestrians to practice this basic form of nonverbal communication.

Newport had three pedestrian fatalities in 2014, including two people killed in crosswalks within a week of each other. That record earned the city the distinction of being among Rhode Island's most vulnerable communities for road users and \$10,000 in federal funds for improving bike and pedestrian safety.

Guess what pedestrians? If you're looking at the back of a driver's head, you can safely assume that the driver cannot see you. And sometimes you look like you could be waiting for the bus or for somebody to pick you up and not like you're about to cross the road. Drivers aren't mind readers. And many of them are distracted. So are pedestrians, walking around looking down at their mobile devices instead of both ways to assess traffic before putting themselves in harm's way.

"If you wave and you don't get a wave back, you know that you haven't been seen," said Bike Newport Executive Director Bari Freeman.

Bike Newport is coordinating the campaign, which will feature a video by Worldways Social Marketing of notable Newporters on the street practicing their waves. Before you get all cynical and think this is like Lloyd Braun's doomed name tag idea from an old "Seinfeld" episode, you should consider that the wave idea has been embraced in other communities, including Austin, Texas.

It will also make the city a lot nicer. I've bicycled on the island of Vinalhaven, Maine, where it seems like all the motorists wave at people on bikes. That's just the island way there. And it is one of the things I cherish about my summer visits there each year.

If our community embraces courtesy and communication, it will not only make the roads and sidewalks safer, it will make visitors want to come back here again and again. It will make people

associate Newport with friendship. We've got one Friendship Street already. Let's make all of them that way.