Last year, the director of the research center in Australia where I serve as the business strategy manager asked me to help maintain a positive, productive culture. Back then, I didn’t anticipate that the task was going to be so difficult. Then, of course, came 2020.

During the first half of the year, Australia experienced an extreme drought followed by devastating bushfires and heavy rainfall that brought massive flooding. Next came the pandemic. With people not coming in to the lab or staying only long enough to conduct their experiments, we lost our sense of interpersonal connection. Then, in July, our director shared that she had been diagnosed with a rare and aggressive cancer.

In the wake of that devastating announcement, one of the center’s group leaders suggested we send our director weekly good news to keep her informed and to try to lift her spirits. One week later, we sent the first email. The rule was that no good news was too small to share. We reported the arrival of much-needed new computers for one lab, one of our group leaders being contacted by a journalist for their expert opinion on viruses in the context of the pandemic, a student submitting their thesis, a paper being published, and a group leader securing child care spots for their children.

The effect of this simple newsletter—which went to all the group leaders as well as our director—was profound. Many people responded, saying they enjoyed this informal venue for learning about their colleagues’ successes. Sharing these updates more publicly gave everyone a boost. After a few weeks, we decided to broaden the recipient list to include everyone at the center.

These days, we solicit good news every Wednesday and send out an email every Friday. The process and format are simple and no-frills, making the newsletter sustainable. At first I worried that people might be hesitant to share updates that seemed too insignificant, but the opposite has been true; they have been eager to highlight their endeavors and successes, big and small, professional and personal. Good news we’ve shared includes securing grants and fellowships, publishing papers, becoming parents, turning 40, and—of course—growing roses on one’s balcony. “I love good news time,” a colleague wrote after a recent email. “It really is uplifting.”

Last month, one group leader’s good news was that, after breaking his arm, he finally had his cast removed. The next week, he reported that his daughter broke her arm and offered the tongue-in-cheek hypothesis that the number of broken bones in his family is a conserved quantity. It wasn’t exactly good news, but the joke made me chuckle. Equally important, it’s personal news, and sharing it helps us stay connected in these difficult times.

With 2020 drawing to a close, we can hope for better things in 2021. But regardless of what the future holds, we plan to continue to share our good news.

Romaric Bouveret is the business strategy manager at the EMBL Australia Node in Single Molecule Science at the University of New South Wales, Sydney, and creator and host of the podcast “Research for What?” He thanks Sue Min Liu for her help. Send your career story to SciCareerEditor@aaas.org.
A bearer of good news
Romaric Bouveret

Science 370 (6523), 1522.
DOI: 10.1126/science.370.6523.1522