

Trib North

Caring habits find a nich

The Elaine Parke file

* Residence: Zelienople.

* Age: 59.

* Notable: Parke, a former marketing executive, has developed a curriculum to reinforce positive values in middle school children. That curriculum will be taught in Seneca Valley School District in the fall. Parke also has just published a book, "Join the Golden Rule Revolution," to complement the curriculum.

By Maureen O. Byko

TRIBUNE-REVIEW

In a rut? Quick, do something about it. June nearly is over, and June is "Get Out of a Rut" month.

July will be time to "Become Involved."

In fact, Elaine Parke has a mission for every month of the year. The Zelienople woman, combining her marketing background with an interest in education, has organized ideas for monthly self-improvement into a school curriculum and a book.

"Join the Golden Rule Revolution," a book of ideas, quotes and inspiration for every day of the year, was released last week and is available on the Internet and at local book stores. It follows the same formula as Parke's middle school curriculum, "The Caring Habit of the Month Adventure." The Seneca Valley School District will implement the program in the fall.

Parke's philosophy is simple: Combine marketing techniques with positive messages, and children will retain the messages.

Not so long ago, children mainly were influenced by parents and school.

Now, the primary influences are peers and the media, Parke said. Rather than lamenting that fact, she thinks she has found a way to capitalize on it.

"Children are surrounded by so much media, it's creating reality," Parke said. "We (the media) just didn't understand the power of what we could do."

So her Caring Habit program invokes several reliable marketing methods. Branding, for instance, associates a particular behavior, or habit, with a month. Like a Nike ad on television, repetition allows an idea to be imprinted on young minds each day of the month so that message sinks in.

The curriculum asks teachers to devote a few minutes a day to a "Caring Habit," little more than sound bites for topics such as helping others and resolving conflicts, Parke said.

Students are exposed to messages on a more passive level, too, in the form of assignment planning books that are distributed monthly. Each month's planner has new messages printed on it, allowing children to be exposed to that month's theme daily.

Other visual reinforcements includes bookmarks for the children and posters in the school.

None of these ideas are complex, Parke said. Nor are the values they promote revolutionary.

"These concepts, they're not my ideas. Any of these concepts are time-honored knowledge," she said. "It's the forging of the knowledge into a system that can strengthen the presence of positive modeling among us."

Parke, who was born in Ohio but moved often as her father was transferred, never agreed with him on her future. He wanted her to be a teacher; she wanted a career in marketing.

So Parke went to college for six years, emphasizing marketing but performing community service working with children.

She never graduated but found success in the business world. At one time, she was vice president of marketing for a beauty products company.

She eventually wound up in Somerset as marketing director for a ski resort. There, she worked with community leaders, teachers and businesses to develop a program that would reinforce positive values in children.

That program evolved into the Caring Habit curriculum. In 1998, the program was launched in the Aliquippa Area School District, a Beaver County school system with a lot of students from low-income families and more than its share of violence. The

program was sponsored by Highmark Blue Cross-Blue Shield.

Melvin Steals, who was principal of the district's middle school at the time, now is principal at Seneca Valley's Haine Middle School.

He described Aliquippa Middle School as "the most violent learning environment I'd ever been in my life."

The Caring Habit program helped reduce tensions and reinforce good behavior, Steals said. That kind of outcome would benefit a more affluent suburban school, he said, because middle school children in any environment need help making good decisions.

"If it can work in Aliquippa, it can work anywhere," Steals said.

With the release of the book, the curriculum's message can reach a wider audience, Parke said. Adults, as well as children, can use reminders for self-improvement.

Parke's illustrator, Darlene Patrick of Greensburg, said she was reading the book just the other day and took some "get out of a rut" advice. The suggestion for the day was to take a class you had been wanting to take but had put off.

"I did," she said. "I actually called (Westmoreland County Community College)."

In the fall, Patrick will be taking a class to update her Internet skills, something she might need to help promote the book.

It was a move she knew she should make but just had not gotten around to doing.

"The thing about this whole program is it's stuff everybody knows about," Patrick said. "You just don't think about it."