

THE PLAIN DEALER

Ohio's Largest Newspaper • Cleveland, Ohio

Old rule helps kids learn about respect

Tuesday, April 03, 2001

By ROXANNE WASHINGTON – PLAIN DEALER REPORTER

During the 1980s, when Elaine Parke was a volunteer tutor in the Head Start Program at Mary B. Martin Middle School in Hough, Parke sat day after day with a meek little girl who simply wasn't learning.

"It was frustrating, because she wasn't grasping the alphabet or numbers," Parke remembers. "And then one day, I was sitting in the classroom with her, and this big drunk man burst through the door looking for her. As it turned out, this guy was her father."

That startling incident was all Parke needed to realize that the child's comprehension wasn't lacking, her home life was the problem.

"After that happened, I kept one arm around her throughout every session that I worked with her," Parke says. "In a short time, she knew the alphabet and was beginning to read. It was obvious this child was starved for positive attention and was concentrating on me, not what I was trying to teach her. Once I knew that, everything changed."

During that time, Parke was squeezing volunteer teaching into her demanding schedule as vice president of marketing with Milo Corp., a defunct hair-care company in Stow. But that breakthrough with her timid student prompted Parke to reassess her priorities.

"I asked myself, Why am I spending so much time and effort writing a \$13 million marketing plan for hair spray," says Parke, who now lives in Zelienople, Pa., outside Pittsburgh. "I really wanted to start using my marketing and media skills to do something to improve society. It was while I was living in Cleveland when that idea hit me."

Parke has written a book, "Join the Golden Rule Revolution – Practice One Habit ... Each Month of the Year" (Caring Media International,

\$19.95). The Golden Rule itself is worded lots of ways, but the bottom line is to treat others the way you would like them to treat you. This simple-sentence idea of mutual respect is tucked into the scriptures of nearly every religion around the world. Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Bahai, Buddhist, Muslim and other faiths emphasize the importance of being aware of how our actions affect others, and to be able to imagine how it feels being on the receiving end of those actions.

"Join the Golden Rule Revolution" is divided into 12 chapters, each of which encourages a positive practice each month. For example, January is "Lend a Hand" month. February's theme is "You Count," and for March, "Resolve Conflicts." Each chapter is broken down into a strategy for each day and peppered with inspirational quotes to help readers deal with road rage, career rage, high-school shooting rage and every other kind of rage we confront daily.

Just a tad corny? Yes, Parke concedes. And yet it seems to be doing the trick for one Pittsburgh-area school.

Parke is part of a nonprofit organization called Habit-tat for Youth & Education that is dedicated to reducing violence and anger among young people. Through Habit-tat, in 1988, Parke launched a program called The Caring Habit of the Month Adventure at Aliquippa Middle School near Pittsburgh. With a strategy that combines posters, banners and slogans, the program emphasizes violence prevention and creating a calmer social climate in classrooms. After two years, the honor roll at Aliquippa increased by 18 percent, the homework completion rate doubled and detentions dropped 25 percent. After that, Parke says, the program was named winner in the Pennsylvania Health Department's Violence Free Youth Challenge contest.

Along with "treat others the way you would like them to treat you," Parke has another favorite quote, presented early in her book: "We have not inherited the Earth from our ancestors, we are borrowing it from our children."

"I've done a lot of research and I haven't been able to find out who first said this," Parke says. "But it stuck with me and it's been a big inspiration for my work."

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