

CARING HABIT OF THE MONTH ADVENTURE

Program gets kids in good-behavior groove

By Maryann Gogniat Eidemiller

Three years ago, Sister John Ann Mulhern sought a character-building program for students at St. Bonaventure Catholic School in Glenshaw, Pa., near Pittsburgh, where she was principal.

"I wanted one that would take the values of the Gospels and help the children to grow in them," she said.

She found that in Caring Habit of the Month Adventure, a non-profit program founded in 1998 by Elaine Parke of Zelienople, Pa. Although it was developed for public schools, Caring Habits is based on Christian values and the Golden Rule.

Sister Mulhern was so impressed with how it fit in with Catholic teachings that she urged Parke to develop a model specifically for Christian schools. Parke was one step ahead of her.

"I knew that one day I would create a Christian version," she told Our Sunday Visitor.

That project is now under way, and four Catholic schools in Pennsylvania that use the original program will be the first to get the new scriptural version, Caring Habits For Christ.

Marketing kindness

It was a destination that Parke planned years ago, when she set out to address "the social and environmental breakdowns that are damaging our youth and threatening our freedoms." As a volunteer, Parke had worked with Chicago street gangs and with troubled youngsters in Cleveland.

"I felt a frustration from having a passion for working with kids and feeling that whatever we do is not enough," she said. "No matter how successful you are with the young people you touch, my heart cried out to the ones you don't touch."

Her professional credentials prepared her to do something about that. Parke is a nationally recognized expert and pioneer practitioner in the application of the influence of social market-

ing. She has more than 30 years of experience in leadership in corporate and consumer marketing, with clients as diverse as the U.S. Department of Labor, Time-Life Books, Hilton Hotels and Black & Decker.

"I learned that it takes six or eight imprints, and from 21 to 30 days, to imbibe a single thought or idea," she said. "One day I said to myself, 'You know how to touch the lives of millions of people [in marketing], so instead of selling hairspray, why not promote kindness in behavior?'"

Program gets results

Parke teamed up with artist Darlene Patrick, of Greensburg, Pa. Patrick created 12 characters for Caring Habits' monthly themes. For example, December's "Evert" is a smiling evergreen tree who encourages "Love Each Other." The characters appear on the program's posters, bookmarks, pencils and workbooks in versions for students in elementary, middle and high schools, and for other community sites.

"I spent four years knocking on doors, trying to sell the idea," Parke said.

Then in 1998, Highmark Blue Cross Blue Shield sponsored the program at Aliquippa Middle School, in suburban Pittsburgh.

"The school was on the governor's watch list," Parke said. "It was like being in a war zone."

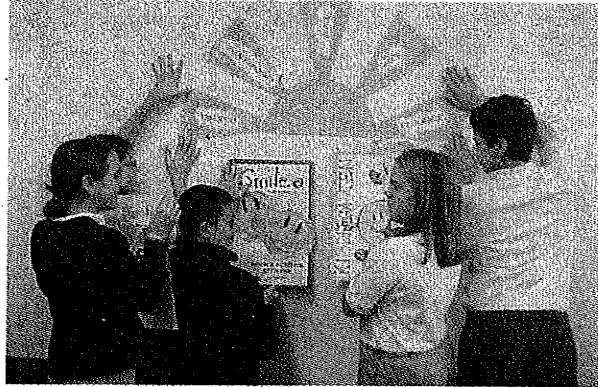
Caring Habits was picked up by half a dozen other Pittsburgh area schools, and the outcomes were documented in a study by the University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Public Health.

Test scores improved in the schools, which had an 18.5 percent increase in honor-roll listings, a 51 percent increase in homework completion and a 22.5 percent drop in detentions and suspensions. Furthermore, behavior changes made students less likely to fight, use drugs and alcohol, damage school property or carry a weapon.

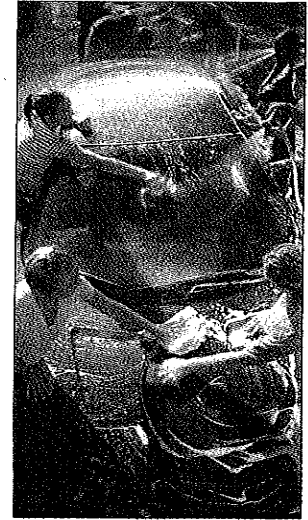
Nourishing the heart

The study also noted an 85 percent increase in caring and respectful behavior, which is the outcome Parke intended.

"There are so many missions around the world that look at food, shelter, clothing and medical care," she said. "People are just as starved for caring and treating each other better, so if you



Above: Butler Catholic School students in Butler, Pa., learn how to "Show a Positive Attitude" during a Caring Habit of the Month Adventure lesson. PHOTO COURTESY BUTLER CATHOLIC SCHOOL Right: Among the Caring Habits lessons is "Lend a Hand," which is celebrated in January. ©CREATAS



look at Caring Habits as a Christian mission, as I do, you can see that it's about nourishing people. And when you nourish people, their hearts are more open to Christ."

Parke was raised in the Reformed Church, but has professional and personal ties with the Catholic Church. In the 1980s, she was hired by Bishop Anthony M. Pilla of the Diocese of Cleveland to research why readership dropped for the diocesan newspaper.

She also has great admiration and love for Catholic saints and a respect for "the wisdom among its members." So, she was not surprised when the first Christian schools to embrace Caring Habits were Catholic.

"The teachers seem very comfortable with the program," said Christopher Squire, current principal of St. Bonaventure. "Even the secular version lends itself well to the Scriptures."

Squire reads lessons to the students every morning and ties them to biblical readings. Banners carry the themes throughout the school, and the lessons are naturally incorporated into a variety of classroom settings.

"These kinds of practices make a lot of sense," said Sister Karen Brink, principal of St. Teresa of Avila, in Ross Township near Pittsburgh. "Respect is just a common courtesy, and I think it's lacking in our society. It's something that we have to keep reminding our students, and ourselves."

Third-grade teacher Sherry Schalcosky brought the program

to St. Teresa after meeting Parke at a book-signing for Parke's "Join The Golden Rule Revolution," which targets all age groups with the "do-unto-others" philosophy.

"The lessons in Caring Habits serve as constant reminders to the students," Schalcosky said. "One theme is 'Be patient and listen,' and in my class, I can say, 'Just be patient and I will get to you next, and we will listen.'"

Sister Mulhern took Caring Habits to Butler Catholic School, where she is now principal, and has pitched the idea to six other Catholic school principals in Butler and Lawrence counties in Pennsylvania.

Biblical version

The scriptural version has biblical titles for its themes. January's "Lend a Hand" became "A Time to Give," and June's "Jump Out of a Rut" is "A Time to Grow."

Patrick, a member of Blessed Sacrament Cathedral in Greensburg, drew on her Catholic background to create illustrations, biographies and prayers for the months' featured saints.

March's theme of "A Time to Heal," for example, focuses on peace and justice. Lessons are based on Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha, the Lily of the Mohawks, who "lived a life of peace and penance among warlike people," and St. Stephen, who was "able to forgive [his] enemies."

"This is a good way for children to learn their faith, and the biblical references are another way of getting them to focus on read-

ing the Bible," Patrick said.

Growing influence

There has been a steady growth for the small operation, which includes Parke's husband, artist Jack Hanzer Susco, who maintains their website. Patrick got the program into two elementary schools in the Greensburg Salem School District, and it is also used by more than 16,000 public school students in Pennsylvania, Maryland and New Jersey.

Caring Habit of the Month Adventure was recently approved as a character-building program for schools in West Virginia. The Department of Education in North Carolina is funding a pilot school, and variations are being used in Norway and on an island in the Bahamas.

Parke is excited about developing Caring Habits for Christ.

"It is the presence of God that binds us together and gives our lives meaning," she said. "His presence nourishes our children and sustains our families, our schools and our neighborhoods."

Her mission, she continued, is based on the advice of St. Francis.

"He said to preach Christ all the time, but only at the last moment, use words," Parke said.

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