

Making a Difference from 30,000 Feet

As a teacher, I knew each day that I was making a difference in the life of a child. I could see it on the face of a 5-year-old who suddenly unlocked the code to read his or her first sentence. I saw it in the eyes of a 4th grader who saw a stalk of celery turn from pale green to red in a science experiment using water and some food coloring.



Beginning a Quest

When I moved into the role of an elementary school principal, I was able to see the difference I could make as a school leader, but I was a step removed from the day-to-day, one-on-one contact with the students. It became a little harder, and it took a bit longer for me to see the results of my labors.

As the Director of Schools for the Diocese of Evansville, I have limited daily contact with the nearly 8,000 Catholic school students. Knowing each student personally is impossible. I don't get the opportunity to share their dreams, successes, or disappointments as I once did as a classroom teacher. I focus on my leadership role, rarely seeing first hand that I am making any significant difference. Oh, our test scores are high, our students receive many awards and scholarships, graduation rates are better than ever, and our enrollment continues to increase. Parents frequently tell me how pleased they are to have their child in one of our schools. Generally speaking, I know from my view at 30,000 feet that we are doing outstanding things in our schools.

Recently, for two days, my vantage point changed. I was graced with the opportunity to meet with teachers and students who had been using a program designed to teach our students about *heroes*. In October, a local inter-religious group of women, known as the Committee to Promote Respect in Schools, of which I am a member, brought Rachel Oestreicher Bernheim and Dr. Kathleen Morin from New York to Evansville for a teacher workshop where this *heroes curriculum* was presented to 120 teachers and administrators. The program was created to remember a true hero, Raoul Wallenberg, a Swedish diplomat who saved over 100,000 Hungarian Jews during World War II. One of the members of the committee, Carol Abrams, read about this program in the *New York Times* and thought our committee should consider it. The committee has worked hard over the last few years to bring resources and curriculum to area teachers so that students can learn of the horrors of the Holocaust and be taught about peace and respect so that something like this will never happen again. At my suggestion, we asked if the program was being presented any where close to Evansville so that we might learn about it first hand. Fortunately, we were informed that the two ladies who had created this program would be presenting it at a conference in Nashville, just over two hours away. So, five of us from the committee decided to go to the conference and hear them for ourselves. We knew within minutes that this was exactly what we had in mind to bring to educators here. I remember saying, "This makes me want to go into a classroom and teach again."

With our newly found friends we began a quest to bring the heroes curriculum - *A Study of Heroes*, and the kits which house this program — to the teachers in our area of Southwestern Indiana. I was so excited about the program that I scheduled our October administrators' meeting on the day of the workshop. Because the workshop was being presented at the facility where we have our monthly administrators' meetings, all of our principals were in attendance. I also asked them to bring one teacher who could take the kit to share with their entire staff. And so began the movement within our schools of teaching and learning about heroes.

This is a Hit

Each year in our diocese, we choose a theme that all of our schools use. This provides an opportunity to work together and show a united effort in teaching our students about particular characteristics or virtues we believe good people should model. With the *heroes curriculum* soon to be in the hands of teachers all over the diocese, I suggested we use, with permission, a phrase from the program — "Be a H.I.T. — a Hero In Training." Our theme became: *Heroes in Training*. Soon after the workshop, ideas began surfacing for how schools and teachers were going to incorporate this into their curriculum. Bulletin boards were popping up everywhere. Essays adorned classroom walls and the halls of our schools. The children's art depicted their ideas of how a hero looks. Our religion classes became opportune times to raise the issues that illustrate characteristics of true heroes. No longer were only celebrities, fictional characters, and athletes named as heroes. Suddenly grandmothers, dads, aunts and uncles serving in the armed forces, policemen/women, custodians, and nurses were seen as the everyday heroes among us.

Surprisingly, the students themselves started recognizing each other for heroic acts. They began wanting to be heroic, not for any reward, but just because it was the right thing to do. Periodically I heard about some of these things. During my usual visits to our schools I saw the beautiful student work everywhere. Parents occasionally told me their child had described the *heroes curriculum* and how they were talking about the heroes in their family or neighborhood. But I had no idea what was *really* happening in the lives of our students. I did not truly understand until I sat totally amazed in meetings with teachers who told Kathy Morin and researchers from New York what they had taught and learned using this curriculum. Their enthusiasm and their stories of how the students responded touched me in a way that I will never forget.

As the researchers asked the probing questions to ascertain whether this program was successful, I sat back, observed, and listened. I saw teachers gathered in a large room after a long school day, 7 days from the end of the school year, eagerly sharing what they had taught their students and how the students responded. Some were frantically taking notes of other teachers' ideas and lessons to use next school year. I heard them talk about new heroes that the students wanted to study, and behavior that had positively changed. I listened as they told about improved vocabulary and writing skills, and a "gentleness" that had taken over their classrooms and, in some cases, their entire school. I heard teachers ask if they could have their own kit so that it would be closer at hand when teaching the lessons preserved within it. Once again, I felt the urge to use it myself with a classroom of students. I sat speechless, blinking back tears as I marveled at what had happened in classrooms that I sometimes only see from my distanced vantage point.

Inspiring the Children

And then, the real excitement began. I took Kathy and the researchers to a 5th grade classroom, where we heard the most incredible stories and watched hands eagerly shoot into the air to beg to share the answer to the questions the researchers posed. I heard one boy call his grandmother a "quiet" hero because she sat with the elderly several days a week in a nearby nursing home. He said, "she doesn't like for people to be lonely, so she sits with the old people there and holds their hands so they won't be sad." I thought of the countless unsung heroes who perform these quiet acts of kindness every day- not for any reward, but because it is the right thing to do. I was surprised that a 5th grader could comprehend the importance of such an act of kindness.

I saw young boys and girls who believed that they each had what it takes to be a hero. They truly understood that you don't have to be famous to be a hero. Being a hero might just mean being there for someone who needs your help. Any one of us might be called upon to do that at any time just as Raoul Wallenberg did when he decided to save the lives of thousands of Jews. He did not do it for the glory. He did it because it was the right thing to do.

This curriculum has changed the way our students look at heroism. Since those dreadful days of the Oklahoma City bombing and September 11, we Americans have learned that what we have mostly watched happen to our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world can now happen to us. We have wept at the tragedies that have befallen innocent men, women, and children. We have felt our hearts swell as we witnessed the love and unfaltering courage of those who risked their own lives to save another. Our own children, students in our schools, and people from all around the globe have observed us as we displayed our grief, our determination, our hope for a better world, and our perseverance to make it happen.

In the Catholic Schools of the Diocese of Evansville we were privileged to discover this curriculum to teach our students what it means to be a hero in today's world. I believe it has better prepared our students to be good citizens by teaching them to emulate the behavior of the men and women they studied this school year. I trust that we have touched the hearts and lives of our students in a way they will embrace throughout their lives. And I suggest that if you look up — about 30,000 feet, you might see this Director of Catholic Schools from Evansville, Indiana with a glorious smile. Never mind the tears. She is getting a bit sentimental these days, and she finds it hard not to laugh and cry when she realizes that God continues to use her as an instrument to make a difference. What a blessed opportunity this has been!

A Study of Heroes is a classroom tested, character education, language arts, social studies, and interdisciplinary program that revitalizes traditional heroes and introduces less familiar ones. Students study their lives and learn to distinguish between a true hero and a celebrity by reading and participating in the program's comprehensive, creative activities. They discover heroes can also be parents, public figures, teachers, neighbors, fellow students...and themselves. For more information contact: Rachel Oestreicher Bernheim or Dr. Kathleen Dunlevy Morin at The Raoul Wallenberg Committee of the United States, 230 Park Avenue, 7th Floor, New York, NY 10169; Telephone: (212) 499-2695.

Phyllis Bussing, Ph.D. is the Director of Schools for the Diocese of Evansville.