

## CHAPTER 1



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# Award-Winning Words of Wisdom

**T**his is the place to read award-winning words of wisdom from your colleagues across the United States.

### Chapter Overview

- **Jenny W. Holmstrom**, a national board certified math teacher at Sumner High School in Sumner, Washington, shares helpful hints developed over a 14-year career at the secondary level.
- **Carey Jenkins**, a teacher of basic skills in English and president and executive director of Operation Link-Up at John F. Kennedy High School in Paterson, New Jersey, asks and answers the question, “What is a good teacher?”
- **Ronald W. Poplau**, an instructor at Shawnee Mission Northwest High School in Shawnee, Kansas, says the key words are still what

we learned very early in our own educational careers: “Experience is the best teacher!”

- **Debra D. Peppers**, vice president of Pepparseed, Inc. and 1999 retiree of Lindbergh High School in St. Louis, Missouri, has come to the conclusion that preconceived stereotypes can be diminished, if not totally eliminated.
- **Ronald W. Poplau**, an instructor at Shawnee Mission Northwest High School in Shawnee, Kansas, says that “goodness needs to be nurtured and never taken for granted.”

### **High School Teaching Tips**

*Jenny W. Holmstrom*  
Sumner, Washington

1. **Call home.** Somehow the practice of calling parents and keeping in touch with them stops when students leave the elementary grades. Granted, it is harder to call all the parents when faced with 150 students instead of one class of 30, but the benefits far outweigh the initial time invested. During the first two weeks of school, I call the parents of each student in each class. I call to introduce myself, tell them about the math program at the school, invite them to Open House, tell them about after-school math tutorial sessions at the school, and tell them how late I stay after school to provide extra help. The initial call sets the tone for the year and makes the students aware that I will contact their parents. Parents want to be involved and informed. Often, they are not given the opportunity at the secondary level.

2. **Reward good academics.** The main focus of school should be academic learning. I award a Math Student of the Month ribbon and certificate each month in each class. I hand out the ribbon and certificate and describe the traits that the student exhibited to win the

award. The traits vary from month to month. I prominently display the names of the winning students in my classroom. In addition, their names are posted in a window in the front office and in the parent newsletter. I also began the practice of sending home congratulatory postcards (they are provided by the school, embossed with the school logo) to parents of every student who earns an A on a math test. I do this all year long. Again, the time it takes to hand-write the postcards is worth the recognition the students get at home. Students value the postcards and save them from year to year. The parents appreciate the news because high school students generally neglect to share even good news at home.

3. **Celebrate birthdays.** The first day of class I have my students fill out informational cards, and I always ask them to write their birthdate. I use this opportunity to explain the “Birthday Problem” and share the fact that if there are at least 23 people in the room, there is a very good chance that 2 have the same birthday. We check to verify the results. Then I explain that I will be writing all their birthdays on my desk calendar and that I expect them to provide treats for the class on their birthday. After all, why should the elementary classes have all the fun? Besides, this is the last time they will ever be asked to do so in their life! The students are always excited by the idea. I remind them when their time nears. After the first two provide treats, it becomes an established tradition. There are a few who can’t or won’t, and that is fine. I never make a big deal out of it. Most enjoy the treats and the opportunity to be recognized. The class community and goodwill generated by this small act last the whole year.

4. **Involve parents.** I have made it my goal to involve the parents in each class at least once during the semester. I collected parent e-mails during Open House this year. With the increased use of computers and e-mail in the school and home, this is a great avenue for sharing information and giving feedback immediately. I have been planning one activity for each class I teach that requires that parents send something to school or come to school to help out with the task.

Again, the increased parent involvement and awareness show up in increased motivation and production in the classroom.

5. **Take risks.** Try something new. Go to a conference, and then try the latest ideas or techniques in your classroom. Students change every year. There are always improvements and new discoveries in the field. Make it your job to keep up with the changes and share them with your students. You will have fun, the students will have fun, and you will never tire of teaching your subject.

### **What Is a Good Teacher?**

*Carey Jenkins*  
Paterson, New Jersey

My teaching philosophy and practices evolved out of my experiences as a poor African American student growing up in rural Mississippi, where I attended elementary and high school. After high school, I attended California State University and graduated with a degree in business. I had a very successful business career with General Foods and Philip Morris Corporation. When I made the decision to leave industry and go into education, I wanted to teach and work in an inner-city environment with students who were from a socioeconomic background similar to mine. For me, the ideal place was the Paterson School District in Paterson, New Jersey, because I wanted to work with inner-city students who needed to be encouraged. I have received numerous local and national awards for my practices and results in the classroom. Among the awards I have received that are best known are the Reader's Digest American Hero in Education Award, received in 1998, and the New Jersey Pride Award in Education, received in 1999. Teachers must employ many basic and creative practices in the classroom to teach and to simultaneously instill in the minds of inner-city students the message that you are conveying the desire to learn.

My purpose here is to share with readers the seven approaches or practices that have always worked for me. The practices are as follows:

- A good teacher has to be a good salesman.
- A good teacher takes the child wherever he or she is and moves forward.
- A good teacher is a risk taker and disciplines with “tough love.”
- A good teacher must motivate and build up the student’s self-esteem.
- A good teacher must take a holistic approach in dealing with students.
- A good teacher must be able to control his or her students using the “tough love” approach.
- A good teacher must teach students the importance of education.

#### *Selling Your Subject*

A good teacher has to be a good salesman. If you can’t sell, you can’t teach. This philosophy applies to any classroom teacher in America, particularly in an inner-city environment. I have had many teachers in my life who have stood in front of the class and put me to sleep. The assumption teachers make when they stand in front of their class is that students know why they need that subject and why they come to school in the first place. These assumptions are totally false.

I started my business career after college as a sales representative for General Foods Corporation. When we went out to call on buyers each day, we did not make sales just by talking about our products. We had to talk about how the products we were selling would help the store. We had to explain how our products would make money for that store. Because we were often fighting competition, it was not always easy. However, we were getting paid to convince the buyers that they needed our products and that our products would generate a certain

volume of business. That's what we called good salesmanship, and that is precisely what has to take place in the classroom. The math teacher must convince the students that they need math, and teachers of other subjects must do the same thing. If this selling process does not take place in the classroom, not a great deal of learning is going to take place. Clearly, this is what must take place in the inner-city classrooms across America.

*Take the Child Wherever He or She Is and Move Forward*

It was frustrating in the beginning because there were students who entered my class with different ability levels. Some students were at or above grade level, whereas others hardly knew what was going on. There were other students in my class who were highly motivated and others who did not know why they were in the class.

Many teachers placed in this situation start placing blame and making excuses for their anticipated failure by saying the following: These kids will never learn because they are from the projects, they come from deprived homes, or they were not adequately prepared in grammar school. Once you start doing that, you've lost the battle.

A teacher must take each student where he or she is and move forward. As a matter of practice, I start each class with a review of the material to be covered, followed by a pretest. By doing so, I know where each student is and can now proceed to teach. The teaching process takes place on a general level that is designed to reach the majority of the students. Small clusters of students who fall in front or behind the group are addressed individually. No one is embarrassed, and no one is singled out; it works each and every time.

*A Good Teacher Is a Risk Taker*

A good teacher will do anything that works to get the message to the students. I have known many teachers who use the same old lesson plans to teach the same subject year after year. If one approach does not work in a classroom, try another. A good teacher will experi-

ment, try things, take chances, and do whatever it takes to give students good classroom experiences. In order to be effective in the classroom, a good teacher has to be a risk taker. To be effective, you must stick your neck out every day for your teaching philosophy and practices.

*A Good Teacher Helps Students Believe in Themselves*

In order to get African American and Latino youths to achieve, you must get them to believe in themselves. On a daily basis, African American and Latino youths are told that they are nothing and that they are nobodies in the home, school, and community. It is the first obstacle the classroom teacher must overcome if inner-city youths are to become good students.

Teaching them about their history can help African American and Latino students with their self-esteem. First, it should be noted that every group has its heroes, inventors, and achievers. Whether a teacher is teaching math, history, or science, approximately 10 to 15 minutes each period must be set aside to inspire, encourage, and motivate inner-city students. The class may be asked to research a prominent historical figure so that person can be discussed in class, or the teacher may simply select a prominent African American or Latino personality of the past or present and discuss his or her accomplishment with the students. This is one of several ways to get these students to feel good about themselves, which is the first step to instilling in them a desire to learn.

The majority of my students always did well because I told them they could do well. I told them they could do anything they wanted to do. I said this over and over again like a “broken record” every day. By the time they graduated, they believed it. What we are talking about again here is salesmanship. Our students (inner-city) suffer from low self-esteem. They tend not to believe in themselves because everyone beats them down. Once that confidence level is built up, the students are ready to learn.

*A Good Teacher Deals With the Whole Child*

When a teacher stands in front of an inner-city class, ready to teach, he or she is facing students with a variety of problems. Some of their problems are sufficiently serious that they take precedence over the subject the teacher would like to teach. An example of these problems may be physical, psychological, or sexual abuse. Other problems may be related to poverty, such as not having enough food, living in inadequate housing (crowded or not enough heat), or facing an eviction notice because of unpaid rent. These are everyday problems many of our students are dealing with. A good teacher will also make it a practice to get to know the parents of the students. It is not necessary to wait until Back-to-School Night to accomplish this. A phone call to the home or a note inviting parents into the school to visit the teacher or classroom of their sons and daughters is sufficient. Getting to know the parents accomplishes many things, two of which I will mention: (a) It enables you to understand the child better, and (b) the parent through this association becomes an ally rather than an enemy of the teacher. Having the parents of your students supporting you solves many problems with your students and administrators.

As a classroom teacher, I know that I have to deal with all the problems in these children's lives. I know that I am not going to teach students English, history, math, or anything else until I deal with whatever is on their minds. You are not going to be an effective teacher unless you take a holistic approach to teaching.

*A Good Teacher Uses "Tough Love" to Control His or Her Students*

I will talk about discipline because it is the biggest problem facing inner-city classroom teachers. The average teacher cannot control an inner-city class for several reasons: The teacher is afraid of the students and afraid of the parents of these students. In addition, teachers will say that they do not have the support of their administrators or that their administrators will not "back them up" when they attempt to discipline a child. I am by no means advocating insubordination, but the classroom teacher must be able to control his or her class with or



without the backing of administrators. If this does not happen, no teaching will take place. My approach to classroom control was simple and direct: A child who did not follow the rules in my class had to leave class for that period and could not come back without his or her parents. Parents generally have jobs, other children, or other responsibilities and cannot afford to be running in and out of the school because of one unruly child. As a result, they (the parents) would force the child to behave so they did not have to come in every day. I call that parental involvement, and it works every time.

There are other reasons why there are so many discipline problems in the inner-city schools of the United States. Many of the teachers have no respect for these students. The students are very much aware of this lack of respect, and they show it. In addition, the teachers have very little respect for parents as well, and the parents are equally aware of this lack of respect. An excellent classroom practice is to show respect to your students and their parents. You have to give respect to get respect. It works. Trust me.

When I was in the classroom, I referred to my students as Mr. Smith or Miss Jones (pseudonyms) when I addressed them. When possible, I greeted my students at the door when they walked into the classroom. I stood at the exit door and said good-bye, shook every student's hand, and said "Have a nice day" at the end of class. My students learned early that I respected, loved, and understood them. They also learned early on that I am in control of my classroom.

#### *Teaching the Importance of an Education*

I can remember that during my preteen and teen years, I would sit in class daydreaming, wondering why I needed to learn algebra, history, science, and so forth. Many days, I wondered why I needed to be in school at all, particularly since I thought I knew how to read, write, and do arithmetic. Most teachers assume students come to class each day knowing why they are there. In fact, students come to school knowing not much more than that one needs an education to better his or her life. That simply does not tell students enough.

Students have to be taught why they go to school and why they need to study math, social studies, science, and so forth. My approach to this is simple and highly effective. Here are two strategies that could be used to stress the importance of education:

1. Bring professional people into the school to talk about their lives and careers. Students are able to learn from these individuals what they do and what academic preparation is needed to do it. By listening to these professionals and asking questions about all the little nuances of their jobs, not only do students learn what they like or dislike about careers, they also learn what preparation is needed in the academic community to go into a career and excel in that career. In these meetings, students learn why math is important to the engineer or why biology or chemistry is important to the premed student, and so forth.
2. Take students out into the marketplace to visit plants, factories, corporate offices, military bases, and so forth. The reason for this approach is to enable students to see firsthand what goes on in these institutions. In addition to observing what goes on in general, our students are invited to “shadow” certain people to get a firsthand, close-up look at certain careers. Also, it is hoped that students will see others of their own race on these experiences, which provides a collateral benefit that helps build self-esteem.

Once students recognize all the academic subjects needed to get a degree in a particular field, they are more prone to study, stay focused, stay in school, and do all the things necessary to learn, get a diploma or degree, and accomplish whatever goals they set out to accomplish.

Another very important advantage of visiting institutions and having people come to talk about their lives and careers is that students learn how and where these people live. Students learn what these people are able to do with salaries of \$50,000 to \$100,000 per

year. The point made here is that these students learn what they must do in order to emulate the highly successful people they have observed and heard speak in their classrooms. One speaker or corporate visit per month is sufficient.

All of my adult life I have heard teachers and others talk about why learning does not take place in the classroom (particularly in inner-city classrooms). Let me share with you some of the reasons given by teachers for poor classroom performance: oversized classes, inadequate facilities, no computers, poor teacher salaries, discipline problems, and children not coming to school ready to learn. I feel that every teacher should assume some responsibility for the students' failure to learn. If learning is not taking place, we must look at ourselves first. If we teach students to believe in themselves and to understand the importance of an education, and if we get our classrooms under control, more learning will take place. In addition, the teacher, to be effective, must take a holistic approach in dealing with students in an effort to get his or her message across in the classroom. There is no magic associated with any of these practices. Nor does one have to be a renowned scholar or Ph.D. to implement or employ these practices. It is all really common sense. Think about it.

### Student Creativity

*Ronald W. Poplau*  
Shawnee, Kansas

All my life I have been an avowed enemy of what I call "Read and Recite, Tell and Test." I actually cringe at the sight of students copying from textbooks to hand in as a study guide. We know only too well that assignment results in a committee of students who take turns doing busywork.

Although my subject is sociology, this approach or philosophy crosses all disciplines. The key words are still what we learned very early in our own educational careers: "Experience is the best teacher!"

We need less repetition and more creation. Sociology is really a contemporary subject that tries to make some pattern or reason out of today's numerous events. The textbook lists up to 10 different kinds of studies sociologists can employ to make social data meaningful. At the *informational* level, these 10 ways really have little if any meaning—they are something for students to organize, memorize, and quickly forget once the examination is over. At the *creative* level, however, they take on a whole new life of their own. In the classroom, students were assigned to create an original sociological study based on any of the 10. Not surprisingly, the most popular studies centered around a *planned* study wherein the budding sociologist had to “cause” something to happen. The next most popular study was the *participatory* study, in which the students themselves were an integral part of the study. Here are examples of student creativity that is meaningful, creative, and downright fun.

#### *Case 1*

Where would you expect people to get involved if an injustice were taking place before them? This site was hypothesized to be a church. To prove this assertion, the student made confidential arrangements with the minister to steal the collection plate *during the Sunday service*. “Theft Sunday” found numerous student “worshippers” who wanted to see what would happen. To our dismay, only shocked glances and frightened worshippers were evident as the student left the church immediately following her row’s donation.

Another Sunday, a different church in a different city brought almost identical results. However, there was one new twist to this study: One of the worshippers called the school to complain about this method of instruction. She soon hung up during a cross-examination that resulted in self-incrimination for not “getting involved.”

#### *Case 2*

Are homosexual marriages accepted? Under usual classroom conditions, a few homophobic students would respond with a disgusted

“NO,” leaving the remainder of the hour to the all too common, “I don’t know!” Two young men and two young women (high school seniors) thought of a new method to test for acceptance. They went to various jewelry stores to buy wedding rings for an “intended gay marriage.” With the assistance of confederates throughout each store, they discovered latent homophobia and outright prejudice. One salesperson, a woman, cautioned the young female “lovers” to be careful, saying she ought to know, as she was gay herself! The discussion that followed in the classroom crossed multiple chapters, and needless to say, “let me try this one” was the most common remark from a room full of students.

#### *Other Creative Cases*

Students came alive with a keen desire to find some method to study social phenomena. One student asked the question “Are humans gullible?” To find out, he wondered if they would buy invisible fish with the promise that they would materialize in two weeks? Gallons of empty water were sold! Another wondered if anyone would stop a thief in a local store. How about two young men who asked for donations in a pail so they could buy drugs? Thirty minutes in a shopping center netted them a little over \$15! Students took grandparents to bridal shops for obvious age differences in nuptials. Little kids five or six years of age smoked fake “cigarettes” and drank fake “beer” in public, only to learn that no one cared.

Perhaps the most meaningful study involved Christmas cards from someone who never existed but which were sent to real friends and relatives. The instructor provided the use of his home address. Nearly 50% responded, and one even suggested a holiday get-together that involved a special dinner. A phone call from the fictitious person resulted in an invitation for dinner, and the person never asked WHO HE WAS. How far humans will go to simply save face!!

Strange as this might seem, I really had no intention of being a teacher, but I accepted an invitation from a principal who saw something in me that I did not see in myself. As might be expected, I was failing miserably in the classroom and to my rescue came an English

teacher, with a “planned study” of her own. She told me to ask my students a simple question: “Why are we not getting along?” At first, I was more than a bit angry at her intrusion in my class, but upon reflection I thought, “Just what I should have known all along: LET US DO SOMETHING!” My students taught me what no education class up to then did: EXPERIENCE IS THE BEST TEACHER!

Last summer I was inducted into the National Teachers Hall of Fame, with a subsequent induction into the Mid-America Education Hall of Fame. To my surprise, many former students wrote from all over the country. Their most important question was, DID I REMEMBER THEIR SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY?! My former history students remembered the history pageants, the reenactments of great historical figures in their most significant roles. Thirty-eight years later, and it was still with them!

There is a textbook in my room, and the students all have one, but they no longer bring them to class. I find it significant that my students scored highest on any district criterion reference test. We have long since required additional teachers for sociology. We all work together, and I see creativity growing. Recently, I was taken to the superintendent’s office on some outrageous charge, only to learn that it was a sociological study. The kid got an A+.

### *Helpful Tips*

1. The District will buy you textbooks. It is nice to check them out and have the students find something in the book that you are covering. Our district just bought sociology books at \$45 each.
2. Have the students fill out a complete plan on what they are going to do. Also have them list WHEN and WHERE. A student sent out 140 racist letters without my knowledge or approval. The Federal Bureau of Investigation; postal inspectors; channels 4,

5, and 9; and all the local newspapers were after me. It turned out wonderfully!

3. There are so many things the teacher can do to judge the abilities, maturity, and so forth of his students. I had a woman come who faked statistics and said she was forming a Parents for American Education group. It was unbelievable how much our students need critical thinking.
4. Students love to share their studies because they are *theirs*. Let them judge first-, second-, and third-place winners.
5. Do one study together: We did the Christmas Card Study, and it was the life of the class.

### **Breaking Stereotypes Through Interactive Role Playing**

*Debra D. Peppers*  
St. Louis, Missouri

Desegregation is not integration. My great-grandmother, a full-blooded Chickasaw American Indian, passed down the adage “Walk a mile in my moccasins.” By literally placing oneself in “another’s shoes” through simulated role playing, I have come to the conclusion that preconceived stereotypes can be diminished, if not totally eliminated. After three years of experiential classroom learning, culminating in three successful student-oriented programs, this past year was spent evaluating the effects of each for analysis in an ongoing action research project.

Raised in a small integrated town in northern Missouri, I then experienced prejudice and hatred at the University of Alabama in the late 1960s. After a frightening semester of student teaching at Theodore, Alabama, during its first year of forced integration, I became aware of the impending need for change. My entire teaching career

has been in the predominantly white Lindbergh School District in St. Louis County, and only after court-mandated busing in 1979 did my African American students begin to see changes in curriculum.

My first experience with the effectiveness of role playing began with a student returning to a theater class after six weeks in a drug rehabilitation center. The students were so eager to hear all that “Curt” had experienced that many began to share their own problems, including racial prejudice and the effects of being stereotyped. We developed a one-act play from the acted-out scenarios, and the results were more than dramatic. Our student audiences were personally affected, and many sought counseling for their own problems. After several articles in local newspapers, Southwestern Bell Telephone hired me for the summer as an educational consultant and made a video and teachers’ packet the following fall. My students and I were able to reach schools throughout a six-state area. *CHOICES*, as we called it, won a St. Louis Emmy award for educational broadcasting in 1989.

The second ongoing program incorporating role playing began in a partnership program with Sumner High School in St. Louis, Missouri, four years ago. KSDK channel 5 provides the expertise in writing, producing, and role playing in public service announcements; we provide the students. Our aired topics have included gang violence, staying in school, racial prejudice, child abuse, and teen suicide.

The third and final project was through the Voluntary Interdistrict Coordinating Council’s (VICC) search for 10 committed teachers, 5 black and 5 white. After volunteering summer hours to work together to share ideas and talents, we each came up with individual programs that would be scheduled in school districts throughout the St. Louis area. My project was originally titled “A World of Difference” but was later confused with another local program of the same name; therefore my program was retitled. “Unique Begins With You” involves students of mine accompanying me and performing for Grades K-12 throughout the area. After researching “not-so-famous African Americans who still left their mark,” we role-play through the use of



simple skits, song, dance, and game-show format for assemblies of several hundred students.

The focus of this year's action research was to document—through ongoing journal entries, video and audiotape, and professional input—to what degree the role playing actually affected the lessening of prejudice and stereotyping. My personal bias predicted that the results would be overwhelmingly in support of my opinion. What I had not anticipated was the most troubled, violent, unpredicted turbulence in the history of our school. I kept an ongoing collage of the articles and clippings of a student walk-out over a controversial black speaker, stabbings, weapons confiscated, assault, and numerous suspensions. The focus of my research could no longer be limited to the confines of my classroom or programs; I now for the first time realized the necessity to strive to affect the entire student population and ideally to expand community- and citywide.

After documenting the predominantly supportive results of the journals and cumulative questionnaire results of the participants, I then documented the lesser, but significant, negative input by those seemingly unaffected. I focused on two vignettes of individual students: one a very successful, enthusiastic black sophomore male; the second a negative, self-admittedly prejudiced senior white female. Both were very open, honest, and cooperative in sharing their viewpoints, family backgrounds, and progress. Both *did* show varying degrees of improvement. The questionnaires were then distributed to all my students who had been in each class experiencing the role playing, whether they had participated in the three projects or not. Summaries were related but rather inconclusive because of the unexpected events of the year.

The strengths of the role playing in each of the programs as well as in the overall outcome were reflected in the responses of the students. As noted in sample quotations, the vast majority of all students related that the role playing enabled them to see the various situations from a different perspective and gave them new insight into the perceived as well as the real prejudices. In addition, they reflected that

the nature of the classes themselves and the enthusiasm and support of the teacher made them more open to the role playing itself. They felt they had ownership in the project, security to express their true feelings, and freedom to explore solutions in a nonjudgmental setting. An increasingly large number of students expressed a desire to become involved in the classes as well as the varying programs.

On the other hand, the weaknesses of the programs were reflected this year more than in the last three years because of the volatile year we experienced. There were honestly more feelings of prejudice expressed; more violent confrontations arose; and less input was seen on a schoolwide basis. The frustration level of those involved in the different programs was increased because of the fact that the publicity and news coverage reflected only the negative within our school district. All of us worked even harder to “spread the word” about the positive activities we were doing.

As the year came to an end, it eventually paid off. Every school in which we had performed sent us letters of thanks and encouragement to continue the programs. We were recognized by VICC Headquarters, the St. Louis Partnership Program, KSDK channel 5, and St. Louis *Post Dispatch*; most recently, I have been named one of the recipients of the World of Difference Awards for advancing positive human relations.

The summation of this year’s research culminated in the conclusion that, overall, each of the three programs using the role playing should be not only continued but expanded. Careful attention must be given to those selected for advancing these projects. Not only are the contents of the sources themselves important, but there are three crucial criteria for expansion: (a) The first demand is that there be a strong, caring, emotionally involved teacher who believes in the necessity of the program. (b) Students must be involved on an interest and volunteer basis and must be encouraged to explore at their own pace and level. (c) As much administrative and professional input as possible should be explored. The extension possibilities for similar programs in the community are endless.

The overall conclusion validated my threefold purpose: The year of observation, evaluation, and reflection indeed confirmed the need for this project; the three years spent in implementing and improving these programs has been substantial; and the direction and potential future needs of each project are clear. Involvement of more students, parents, faculty, administrators, and professionals in education and business can all be incorporated in expanding these programs to have an even larger impact.

### **The Doer of Good Becomes Good**

*Ronald W. Poplau*  
Shawnee, Kansas

It is unfortunate that Columbine High School has changed the reputation of our young people. All the stereotypes of “sex, drugs, and violence” are, after all, true, and we must change our schools to prevent such a disaster from ever taking place again! Fortunately, Columbine is merely an aberration—tragic but in no way typical of today’s young people.

At Shawnee Mission Northwest High School just the opposite has been true since the day it opened in 1969. The students have collected food, clothing, and even presents for all the men at the state prison. In 1991, we decided to make this an autonomous class. It was eventually called “Cougars Community Commitment.” It is a social science offering for a half-credit per semester. It is open to juniors and seniors, and with approval of the sponsor, students may enroll for as many as four semesters.

Seventeen students were enrolled the first year, and those 17 set a standard few classes have met. Few in the community took the class seriously: Rake the lawn, mow my grass at no charge?! Our class motto was simply “THE DOER OF GOOD BECOMES GOOD!” It was and is our opinion that what we used to take for granted now has to be taught. Goodness needs to be nurtured but never taken for granted.

I remember our first major project: saving a couple's home from foreclosure. The wife had spina bifida and had a hospital bill of \$40,000. They appealed to us for help. Those 17 students took on the couple's plight as if it were their own. They invented "Dollar Day" at the high school, petitioned local businesses for donations, and accumulated enough to refinance the couple's home and even reduce their monthly house payment. With \$2,700, they worked a modern-day miracle. The wife, in tears, thanked the entire student body, who responded with a standing ovation and a "let's do it again" chant. The rest is history.

The CCC (as it is commonly called) has grown to include half the junior and senior classes. It is a voting member of the city government of the City of Shawnee. The program now comprises five classes a day, with an agenda that simply staggers the imagination, including a monthly dinner dance for the elderly held in the school cafeteria on the final Saturday of each month. Students begin decorating at 2:30 in the afternoon. By 4 p.m. guests start arriving, and a dinner is served by the students at 5:30, with dancing to a live orchestra. Students and the elderly dance together, dine together, and, above all, mingle with each other. This mutual intergenerational experience benefits both age groups.

Other projects have included taking care of a couple's pet dogs while the husband was in a local hospital. Two girls and a delivery man put up an entire new ceiling for his homecoming because the fine dust from the ceiling would have affected his emphysema. When he died unexpectedly, eight CCC girls carried him to his final resting place as pallbearers.

Students raise all the monies themselves by a variety of projects: coupons at a food store, dues, Dollar Day, and donations. The budget tops \$10,000 a year. They help the elderly pay for ambulance service, pay utility bills of the indigent, and rebuild homes and lives after fires. This past year they provided Thanksgiving dinner for over 500

families. Truckloads of food left our school as students boxed and delivered the holiday meal.

Their charity is not limited to the traditional poor but was also extended to an ex-convict who had spent 54 years in prison. That criminal had the dubious honor of being what the Kansas Secretary of Corrections said was “undoubtedly the most dangerous and cunning criminal to ever occupy a cell in the 110-year history of the Kansas State Prison.” In addition to giving him the necessities of life, the students also became his good friend and frequently socialize with him. The convict’s recent book bears this inscription: “DEDICATION TO MY FRIENDS AT SHAWNEE MISSION NORTHWEST HIGH SCHOOL, RON POPLAU AND THE KIDS OF CCC. THEIR HELP MADE MY TRANSITION TO THE COMMUNITY EASY.”

Along the same lines, the CCC students gave each of the boys and girls at Associated Youth Services a generous Christmas present of a basketball, a Walkman, a T-shirt, and a sweatshirt. In utter surprise and with a voice full of emotion, one boy shouted, “I don’t want to hear anyone say anything bad about S. M. Northwest, or they will have me to answer to!”

The lives of the CCC students have been drastically changed as well. One student gave up drugs, remained in school, and even became a speaker for graduation. She went on to college and is now happily married. Her parents give the CCC an average of \$1,000 a year in gratitude. Another student won’t go to the district’s Alternative Placement Program because they do not have a volunteer program. Forty-five students tutor at elementary and middle schools every day. Test scores have risen from almost all Ds to not lower than a B. Individual students reward their classes with pizza parties, cookies, and movie tickets.

Once a month, Lakeview Retirement Village sends a delegation to our school for the monthly dinner with the students in our cafeteria. White tablecloths cover the tables, flowers and candles provide fitting

decorations, and students sing during the meal. An 88-year-old woman took the microphone to thank the students, only to break down and cry; in tears she said, "We love you all!"

Needless to say, these students have not gone unnoticed by civic groups in the area. It would be impossible to list all the awards these students have won: Penney's Golden Rule Award four times; the SERTOMA award; Noxema Kansas Award; Prudential, Kiwanis, and Optimist Awards. In addition, *Kansas City Star* ran a special on the class; a doctoral dissertation on this type of education was written on them; and just a month ago they were the guests of the governor of Kansas in the State Capitol building for the Governor's Spirit of Giving Award.

Last year, I was inducted into the National Teachers Hall of Fame as a result of the work these students do on a daily basis. No fewer than 15 awards have been directly given to me, but none will top the parting gift from last year's CCC. They all gathered at the front office and formed a kind of gauntlet. Amidst cheers, applause, and tears, they presented me with a tuxedo for the Washington, D.C., induction ceremonies. In the pocket was a card signed by each member with the words "KNOCK 'EM DEAD IN WASHINGTON, D.C."

What a shame, what an injustice that these students get overlooked by the media and people in general for the trenchcoat mafia and two crazed students at Columbine High School. Judging by the number of visitors and inquiries, *this* program is reaching more and more high school students. A Kansas legislator will introduce a bill to make this program mandatory in each high school in Kansas. Many years ago, the great educator and president of the United States Woodrow Wilson said, "Nothing but what you volunteer has the essence of life, the springs of pleasure in it. These are the things you do because you want to do them, the things that your spirit has chosen for its satisfaction." At Northwest High School we simply say "THE DOER OF GOOD BECOMES GOOD!"

### *Helpful Tips*

1. Start small and let one success build on another.
2. My enrollment for next year is simply out of control—I will have almost 500 students.
3. I have sample contracts for each student—I would be glad to share these with anyone interested.
4. The district and the high school just love this class. It costs them nothing, and the publicity is beyond words.
5. Self-esteem skyrockets. Anyone can be successful in this class. I am not surprised that the most common grade is an “A.” That represents 65 hours per quarter of volunteer work.
6. Guest speakers every now and then help a great deal.
7. Last Thanksgiving, the four volunteer classes fed 500 families a complete meal.
8. Many students enroll for four semesters. This class is only open to juniors and seniors because members must be able to drive a car.