

A View from Glen Hill: From the mouths of babes, let us take a lesson

By [Stephen Hudspeth](#) on May 27, 2014



I recently learned the fascinating back-story to the “Be Kind” bumper sticker I mentioned in one of my columns in February.

This sticker now appears on cars not just at the Darien train station where I saw it but also on vehicles all over the Northeast — and I hope eventually all over the country. As a letter to this newspaper’s editor that was published two weeks ago explains, the sticker memorializes the late Bill Mahoney of New Canaan, whom his brother David describes as both a highly accomplished businessman and a very generous philanthropist and one who lived by that “Be Kind” motto. Mr. Mahoney passed away a year ago. That bumper sticker haiku now lends its name to the charitable foundation in formation in Mr. Mahoney’s honor and memory, created to carry forward his work.

I was discussing the story of this bumper sticker just before our choir rehearsal began two Sundays ago with fellow choir members David Blanchard, the interim head of the Montessori School here in Wilton, and Susan Marnell, the school’s former longtime music director. They told me another moving story, one that I had also not heard before. I pass it on here because it fits well in the “Be Kind” tradition and also, with the school year now coming to a close, it’s a great time to reflect on all the good that happens in our schools in town, both public and private, as well as in our community life generally.

Here’s the story: Five years ago, the eighth grade class of the Montessori School in Wilton participated in considering the establishment of a statement of principles for the class with their former head of school, Mary Zeman. After reviewing foundational statements of principles from different sources, the students chose words of the late illustrious Rabbi Abraham Heschel and added to them words of their own from their Montessori experience. Since the time of its creation, recitation of this statement by the Montessori School’s middle school students is the way that each of their school days begins. Here is that statement:

*“Let us know that every word has power,
Let us make sure that every deed counts, and
Let us do our share to redeem the world
In spite of all absurdities, all frustrations, and even disappointments;”*

*We are a Civitas community, and
We strive to build life as if life were a work of art.*

“Civitas” is an interesting choice of word. For explication of it, I went to my prime source for things Latin (and ancient Greek), Max Gabrielson, Wilton High School’s extraordinary classics teacher. He explained, with appropriate citations, that the Latin noun “civitas” means “the condition or privileges of a (Roman) citizen, citizenship, freedom of the city.” It also means, more concretely, “the citizens united in a community, the body-politic, the state.” He added that the related Latin adjective “civilis” means, among other things, “courteous, polite, civil.”

Head of School Blanchard tells me his school’s own definition of “Civitas” denotes the central Montessori principle of “grace and courtesy” so that a student observing someone being unkind might well say something like “that’s not Civitas.”

This statement — really a pledge — is quite a work, and it’s all the more impressive that it was chosen and modified by eighth graders and that, though written fully five years ago, those beautifully expressed and powerful words continue to start every school day even now.

While these words have application in any setting, I thought of them especially in the context of the eloquent remarks of moderator Curt Welling as he closed our town’s most recent Annual Meeting. He pointed to the way town government works here in Wilton as an exemplar for our whole nation of the way in which those of different parties and different viewpoints, both volunteer and paid leaders, reach out to each other continuously without regard to political affiliation to make things work for our town seamlessly, thoughtfully and professionally.

We are indeed blessed in this way. It is not so by any means for all of the towns in this region and certainly not so for all levels of government here in America, as all of us know all too well. Maybe in addition to reciting our nation’s Pledge of Allegiance, our government officials should join these Montessori School students in reciting each day as their work begins that extraordinary statement of vision and purpose:

“Let us know ...; let us make sure ...; let us do”

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