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Returning Heroes to Classrooms and Homes by Dennis Denenberg

Returning Heroes to Classrooms and Homes

by Dennis Denenberg, author of *50 American Heroes Every Kid Should Meet*

Can you imagine a world without true heroes? It actually exists for many of our young people. Beginning in early childhood, they are surrounded by cartoon-fad figures. As they grow up, they transition into the unreal world of pop culture icons and super-rich athletes. The real people who made our world a better place are not introduced to them in many schools and homes. Just ask a teenager who Jonas Salk is.

How did this happen? We have no one to blame but ourselves. We have permitted the mass merchandisers and the celebrity packagers to capture the hearts and minds of our youth; then we scratch our heads and ponder why they don't have positive role models.

Would simply hanging pictures of real heroes in our homes and classrooms solve this problem? No, but it would be a good way to begin. We need to give some space to the giants of human achievement. And then we need to start conversations with our young people about the awesome women and men of both the past and present who have performed heroic deeds or have lived extraordinary lives of accomplishment.

How do you do this in our fast-paced, technology-filled daily lives? You read biographies, not just books about cute and fuzzy animals, to young children. You engage your older children in conversations and Internet searches about real people who made a difference. "Pie in the sky," you murmur? Try it. If your children like sports, show them a Roberto Clemente Web site exemplifying an athlete "who gave back." If your children are enamored of "cool celebrities," introduce them to Martha Graham, who dared to think out of the box and changed the world of dance.

Engage your children in conversations about real people who made a difference.

Following my recent talk to a group of school administrators in Virginia, I received an e-mail from an attendee who had gone home and told his two daughters, aged fourteen and nine, about Elizabeth Blackwell, the first female American to become a medical doctor. After 26 rejected applications to medical school, she was accepted into Geneva Medical College in upstate New York as a joke. The joke was on the 50 men who let her attend. She graduated first in her class.

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The administrator's two daughters were hooked. They read about Blackwell in *50 American Heroes Every Kid Should Meet*, and they immediately went to the Internet to find out more about her. Not satisfied with Internet information, they insisted that their dad take them to the public library, where they checked out whatever books they could find on Elizabeth Blackwell.

Why bother to make such an effort? Quite simply, knowledge about a real hero can truly change a young person's life. First and foremost, it can help instill the all-important message to never give up. Heroes persevere. Edison, Churchill, Clara Barton, Harriet Tubman, for example. Failure is simply part of learning for heroes. Heroes teach all of us that we can succeed if we keep trying and are willing to work hard. They teach that we are able to live principled lives and make a difference.

One strategy I use to connect my audiences to real heroes of national and world importance is to examine the personal, unsung heroes in one's own life. Such individuals enrich our lives. My personal heroes are my parents, my speech therapists and my eighth grade American history teacher who instilled a love for Thomas Jefferson that prompted me to attend The College of William & Mary, where Jefferson went to school.

Who are your personal heroes? Have you told your children about them? Who are your children's personal heroes? Do you know about them? Have you met them? Are you one?

The world of heroes is not always easy to explore. I am frequently asked: "What about the flaws?" Yes, heroes have flaws. They are human.

We shouldn't hide their flaws, but neither should we highlight their flaws over their achievements. Children recognize good and bad. They can understand, and in some ways delight in knowing, that even great people are not perfect. Putting heroes on a pedestal makes it hard to emulate them. Recognition that heroes do good despite their flaws can serve as a powerful motivator.

About 55 years ago a second grade teacher in Holland introduced her class to Dr. Albert Schweitzer by reading newspaper articles about the young medical missionary in Africa. One of her students, eight-year-old Harold Robles, became fascinated and wrote to Schweitzer. This was the beginning of a steady correspondence. When the future Nobel Peace Prize winner went on a world tour to raise funds and reached Holland, he wanted to meet "little Harold". Later, Robles became a medical doctor and founded what is now known as the Albert Schweitzer Institute for the Humanities, which today has medical missions in more than 110 countries. That's the power of a real hero.

It's time for us to make sure that real heroes are in our children's lives.

Have you told your children about your personal heroes?

Dennis Denenberg is the co-author of 50 American Heroes Every Kid Should Meet (Lerner Publishing Group, 2006). He addresses audiences around the country including the Educational Records Bureau conference in New York City in October 2004. His Web site is www.heroes4us.com.