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**SERVICE AWARD** Wilmette moms Lisa Axelrod (left) and Mary Roth, founders of The Kindness Connection, have received a Service Award from the Trier Township award for community service could go to their entire team. [www.wilmettelife.com](http://www.wilmettelife.com)

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## Axelrod and Roth know kindness can be catching

BY KATHY ROUTLIFF  
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The first thing Lisa Axelrod and Mary Roth said last week when the George R. Noyes community service award they have received from Noyes Trier Township to thank them for their work in the Trier Township award for community service could go to their entire team.

"We could see it coming," Roth said Monday. "We owe it all to so many people and we wish it could go to everyone."

Without their team of board members and volunteers, and their tiny two-person staff, the tiny Wilmette nonprofit said, their dream of opportunity wouldn't be leading young girls to think about others, to reach out and help those less fortunate than themselves. In short, it wouldn't be leading children how to be kind.

That simple lesson lifts boys and girls alike. They even like kindergarten and first graders. It's the way through with grade-level reading, leading the world," Axelrod said.

Despite the success, Axelrod and Roth were delighted to receive early this month that they had been chosen and would receive the award April 10 at the township's annual meeting at the North Shore Senior Center.

The award marks the latest step in a journey that began when the two friends' children were kindergartners at Wilmette Elementary Elementary School.

"The two of us were talking in the summer of 2006 about why we'd like to be doing now that our kids were going into first grade," Roth remembered. "But the talk eventually turned to what we'd like to do to help the most vulnerable and how we'd like them to learn to be kind to others."

When they learned that most charitable organizations don't include children younger than 12 in their campaigns, they decided to start a program themselves at McKinzie. When they got the go-ahead from the principal, the two started what turned out to be a successful pilot program.

Their backgrounds come in handy. Both are local attorneys at the Baker Donnerman School in Wilmette, also work with students at



Wilmette moms Lisa Axelrod (left) and Mary Roth, founders of The Kindness Connection, say they wish their Trier Township award for community service could go to their entire team. [www.wilmettelife.com](http://www.wilmettelife.com)

a kindergarten day school, and has a bachelor's degree in economics. Axelrod has an MBA from the U.S. College Graduate School of Management and is a member of the Boston Consulting Group.

"Mary had teaching, I had business, and we said, 'Let's figure something out that can get every kid participating,'" Axelrod said.

"Almost every school has canned food drives and other such good charitable efforts, but kids also put in time if they can choose to bring a can of food in. We wanted something that was 100 percent participation."

By early 2008, the program had evolved into the seeds of The Kindness Connection. Axelrod and Roth gathered the group that would become their board and have since been organizing the hundreds of kind acts.

Working out of their homes and garages, they used kid and craft and recycled items from neighbors and the garage. They encouraged to work with to develop small and simple projects within the abilities of young children. The goal was to meet the needs of charitable groups and the respective organizations.

Then Axelrod and Roth would

gather materials for the projects, set up dates with participating schools, and work with the children then to make something from plain cloth to key chains to illustrated storybooks.

In addition to key chains and stickers, many children have made or decorated booklets and stickers for children in their homes, hand written and illustrated books for food bank program students, provided drawings for Christmas gifts and warmies, and have written letters of thanks to American veterans.

The reaction proved to be explosive. Axelrod said, and it always involves a learning experience.

"Over time we developed a curriculum with a discussion guide so that students could talk about what it means to be a member of a community, and to give to that community, even making very simple questions like 'How did it make you feel to help?' We learned to plan that well," she said.

Word of The Kindness Connection program spread, and the project quickly expanded to 150 schools and community groups including Scout troops and other clubs.

The record developed a strategic

plan last year so that TWC could make the best use of its resources, and hired part-time Executive Director Eva LaFlore and assistant Audrey Penn. The group has undertaken fund raising events, receiving a \$10,000 grant from the Dr. Seuss Foundation. They are seeking other grants.

Part for the most part, Axelrod and Roth still operate out of their homes. Each have a dedicated workspace for craft materials and dedicate their time on the project over their own part-time careers.

Their primary focus is still on children, more than 77,000 of whom have been affected by 80,000 other people around the world who need 80,000 handmade projects.

In fact, the award also should be shared with all the children who work on the projects. The Kindness Connection program, Axelrod and Roth said.

"These are the volunteers of this future. The power of the future will make our world a better place," Roth said.

For more information on The Kindness Connection, including its next event May 3 at the Sky High Sports Emporium Fun Park in Niles, go to [thekindnessconnection.org](http://thekindnessconnection.org).