

DAILY NORTH SHORE

Sunday Breakfast with Lisa Rosenberg

by Bill McLean • July 15, 2017

The words made Lisa Rosenberg cry.

They had been written by a grade-school student in a letter to a war veteran.

“The child thanked the veteran for saving lives and then wrote, ‘Not all heroes wear capes,’ ” says Rosenberg, the executive director at The Kindness Connection (TKC), a nonprofit based in Wilmette since 2006.

The letter was part of a veteran care kit. TKC had provided the kit’s materials for a classroom full of kind kids (and future kind adults), who crafted sincere messages to add warmth to the project.

The 51-year-old Rosenberg — a Highland Park High School graduate and a resident of Wilmette since 1998 — comes up with another example of a youngster with a kind heart as we sit at a table in the middle of Hotcakes on a Saturday morning in Wilmette.

“We were helping kids put together kits for a literacy program,” Rosenberg recalls. “Before sending the kits to children in Kenya, one of the students had placed a quarter and a note in a pencil bag. The note said, ‘I hope you enjoy reading as much as I do.’”

“Just the other day I heard Mary [Roth, a TKC co-founder, with Lisa Axelrod] say something that is so true. She said we need a ‘Kindness Revolution’ in this country. Our culture today, it seems, is not very kind.”

The folks at The Kindness Connection are doing what they can to infect our youth with strains of compassion. TKC’s mission is to cultivate lifelong giving through impactful service experiences that connect people with those who will benefit from kindness. Children in local hospitals, in addition to local vets and children abroad, receive TKC kits. So do senior citizens, as well as family members who are about to adopt a pet.

In 2017, Rosenberg reports, a combined 5,000 students at 20-25 schools located along the North Shore and the North Side of Chicago devoted time during school hours to spread kindness to others. So often, TKC’s website states, teachers and parents and school administrators would like to integrate volunteer opportunities and service learning into the classroom, but such an endeavor is difficult to implement because of busy schedules and maxed-out resources.

It’s not difficult for The Kindness Connection. TKC handles such efforts with TLC.

Reading, ’riting, ’rithmetic and ... ’ruism (short for altruism).

“We charge a school a small fee for the supplies, after a school calls to notify us of its interest in giving students an opportunity to experience a service project,” says Rosenberg, who earned her bachelor’s degree in psychology at the University of Michigan and her master’s degree in social work at Loyola University in Chicago. “We then provide the school with a list of project choices for each class and work with the school’s administration and teachers to customize a program. What we do helps a school meet two [empathy and compassion] of Illinois’ state standards in education.

“The kids,” she adds, “aren’t just doing their part in helping others feel good; they’re also experiencing the wonderful feeling of giving. You feel better about yourself when you give.”

Some schools, I learn, chose to cancel Valentine’s Day and Halloween parties in order to use that time for TKC projects.

Rosenberg’s breakfast order arrives. It’s a parfait in a fancy fountain glass, with a strawberry on top of a layer of granola, sliced bananas and yogurt.

Her eyes widen as soon as the treat hits the table.

“It looks like I ordered an ice cream sundae for breakfast, doesn’t it?” a smiling Rosenberg says.

Rosenberg and her husband, Jeff (another HPHS graduate), have three children: Michael, 22; Sam, 21; and Ilana, 19. They spent their first date with Jim Carrey — and a bunch of other comedy-club patrons, when Carrey, the headliner that night, wasn’t well-known.

Ilana was a serious third-grader when she and her classmates completed a TKC project. They made bookmarks, with various textures, for students at the Hadley Institute for the Blind and Visually Impaired in Winnetka.

What the class was reading at the time: *The Story of My Life*, by Helen Keller.

Years later Ilana volunteered at a homeless shelter in California, spent a month with an orphanage in Costa Rica and served as president of the social service club at New Trier High School.

Her big brother, Michael, was a student at McKenzie Elementary in Wilmette when The Kindness Connection planted its first seed in a classroom. Ernie — TKC co-founder Roth’s son — attended the school at the same time. Their moms had become good friends.

Rosenberg, a founding board member at The Kindness Connection, was named executive director of the organization in 2014.

“I watched kids at a school [St. Thomas] in Chicago work on Kindness Kits one day, and it amazed me, impressed me,” says Rosenberg, whose sister, Audrey Pam (the project design and operations coordinator at TKC), was the nonprofit’s first employee. “Those kids put their hearts into every project. You should have seen how eager and enthusiastic they were.

“What also thrills me about my position at The Kindness Connection is every opportunity I get to meet and work with many wonderful people. All of them are focused on kindness and making their communities better places.

“How fortunate am I?”

The Kindness Connection, (847) 807-9340, is located at 119 Central Park Avenue in Wilmette. For more information, please visit thekindnessconnection.org or email a request to info@thekindnessconnection.org.