

## Caring is contagious. Pass it on

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Darien has just embarked on one of its most ambitious building projects to date. It does not involve bricks and mortar, nor will it result in anything tangible that you can walk on, work in or live in. Furthermore, it does not require major spending. What it does ask is a long-term commitment by every member of **the community**; **the** young, **the** old and all in between, **the** wealthy and not so wealthy, busy moms and dads, stressed-out kids, commuting parents, stay-at-home parents, Little League coaches, football game attendees and, well, everyone who lives, works and plays in Darien. And while it may raise some questions, it won't raise your taxes. Mostly it should raise a lot of interest and support.

**The** project is to build a **Community** of Accountability and Respect for Everyone (C.A.R.E.)

"Hah," I hear you saying. "That's not necessary here. I'm respectful and accountable. So are my kids. So are my friends. This is a wonderful **community**. Everyone is nice. Everyone cares."

To a large extent that is true. Nonetheless, there is clearly a problem that has been identified by many who are responsible for or invested in **the** health and well-being of Darien and its residents. Over **the** last few months, members of **the** Darien **Community Fund's** Human Services Planning Council found that conversations in their meetings constantly reverted back to **the** perception that there has been a loss of respect and lack of accountability throughout society today - and Darien is not exempt. When **the** HSPC decided to address **the** issue head on, **the** Board of Selectmen, **the** Board of Education, **the** Darien Public School system and nearly 50 other local organizations and businesses offered their full support and endorsement. **The** Darien Library offered to develop a number of programs surrounding **the** C.A.R.E. campaign, including a town-wide book read in January. Local businesses have donated money, talent and time to help produce **the** posters, banners and bumper stickers you will see around town. And speakers at last week's kickoff event at Darien Town Hall included First Selectman Evonne Klein, assistant school superintendent Stephen Falcone, Darien Library director Louise Berry, Darien Chief of Police Duane Lovello, and director of Darien Youth Services Alicia Sillars.

Darien, of course, is not alone in instigating this kind of campaign. Hundreds of towns across **the** country have determined that there is a need to try to change **the** culture of a **community** where values have slipped or where it appears they have slipped because behavior has deteriorated.

Where there used to be no excuses for bad behavior, now it appears there are many. Here are a few: Screaming insults at **the** other team at a sporting event is OK because winning is more important than good sportsmanship; making a point at a public meeting by personally attacking or belittling someone with an opposing view is OK because you know you're right; cutting in front of someone in **the** carpool lane is OK because you are late for a doctor's appointment, ballet lesson, (keep filling in **the** blanks); talking on a cell phone in **the** car without a headset is OK because you don't have time for **the** stupid headset and your kids in **the** backseat are too young to know it's illegal - or are old enough to know, but you tell them it's OK if Mommy does it just for a few minutes; weaving across **the** center line and failing to use your indicator are OK because you're on your cell phone without a headset; pulling out all **the** legal stops to make sure your kid beats **the** charge after he is arrested for DUI, marijuana in **the** glove compartment or hosting a beer party is OK because a permanent record might wreck his chances of getting into a top college; not stopping to help someone who needs a hand is OK because it might interfere with **the** relentless pursuit of your ultra-busy day.

Plus, there are plenty of ways to excuse our excuses. Stories abound on how **the** technology that was supposed to simplify our lives has made them more complicated and time-consuming than ever. Much has also been written about how over programmed both kids and parents are today and how that can result in major stress. **The** fact is over programming also results in a lot of rushing around, families not communicating and a false sense of accomplishment. And technology may have made us quicker and smarter, but it has also made us more insular, isolated and rude. Whether we are walking down **the** street, driving **the** car or paying at **the** checkout counter, if we're also chattering into **the** phone, we've blocked out most of **the** sensory input from everything and everyone else around us, and that makes us less effective. An example of good multi-tasking is a short-order cook. An example of bad multi-tasking is a short-order cook on his cell phone.

It's very unlikely that technology use and over programming is going to lessen any time soon or that we're suddenly going to be living in Mayberry or that **the** typical 21st century parents are going to morph into June and Ward Cleaver. What **the** C.A.R.E. project hopes to do over **the** next several years is to re-focus attention on what should be most important in our lives: **the** people around us and how we treat them. We need to ask ourselves whether our expectations of how we want to be treated differ from how we treat others. Within one's immediate family, is there respect between family members, do **the** adults hold themselves accountable for their actions and their children accountable for what they do? When we move through **the community**, do we take **the** time to hold a door, wave someone ahead in line, say thank you or smile at a stranger?

"Caring is contagious. Pass it on" is one of **the** project's slogans. There aren't too many contagious things that are good for you. This one is. Pass it on.

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