

## COMMUNITY INSIGHTS

### SOMETHING THAT COULD NEVER HAPPEN IN DARIEN?

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A recent episode of "Law & Order" recounted an incident between teens on a basketball court, their parents' subsequent involvement and a resulting tragedy. **The** story entails one parent in particular egging on her son to be more aggressive in taking control after he is shut out of a neighborhood game. Misconstrued actions and failure to behave civilly lead to **the** shooting deaths of a teenager and of a completely innocent young child playing nearby. One parent is arrested for **the** shooting and another - a white, middle-class "soccer mom"- is arrested for encouraging her son and his friends to act aggressively and then hiding **the** evidence of their actions. **The** district attorney points out that not only did these parents fail to take responsibility for **the** actions of their children and hold them accountable, but they themselves "acted like children."

Before dismissing this as something that could never happen in Darien, think back to **the** Darien-New Canaan hockey game in March. Aggression, lack of civility and violence defined **the** behavior at that game - and **the** outcome could have been much worse.

At **the** last three monthly meetings of **the** Darien **Community Fund's** Human Services Planning Council, **the** talk has centered around **the** pervasive perception that too many parents do not, cannot or have no idea how to set boundaries for their children. Examples have been raised of parents who apparently have no clue how to control their kids, parents who would rather be friends with than discipline their children, parents who are too stressed and busy to pay attention, parents who place fitting in and getting ahead over discipline and control, and parents who just don't care.

**The** adjunct topic in these discussions is about respect - where has it gone, why is it missing and how can we get it back? organizations: **the** **Community Fund**, Darien School District, Child Guidance, Darien Family & Youth Options, **the** Council of Darien School Parents, **the** Depot teen center, Darien Police, Darien Library, Youth Commission, Board of Selectman and St. Luke's Church. Members from other organizations and agencies occasionally attend meetings as guests. It is a group of people who are intelligent, caring, knowledgeable about **community** issues, service-oriented and who interact with a broad spectrum of **community** residents every day.

Further, **the** concern over parental discipline and lack of respect is not limited to council members, but has cropped up as a recurring theme in other meetings, conversations and news communications.

For example, Darien Times columnist Rebecca Martorella recently wrote an excellent piece on parental discipline, in which she points out that **the** word "discipline" literally means "to teach" and concisely addresses **the** reasons for and ways to set boundaries for children. **The** following week Martorella wrote about respect for each other within relationships. It could be coincidence, but there are usually timely reasons behind **the** choice of topics.

Here are just a few of **the** observations made by **community** leaders as well as some concerned parents over **the** last few weeks:

"Parents are unwilling to be **the** 'parent', they don't want to be **the** bad guy, **the** authority figure. They want to lay it on someone else." (This with regard to parents who admonish their children to behave or they will get in trouble with **the** police, **the** store clerk, **the** librarian, etc. - anyone but **the** parent).

"So many mothers have so little confidence and so much insecurity regarding setting boundaries."

"There is a subliminal message of 'I am weak' on **the** part of parents."

"I see two sets of parents. One wants kids to take responsibility for their actions and **the** other type is always **the** 'lawyer', looking for ways to excuse their kid or protect him from **the** consequences of bad behavior. We need to build up **the** ranks of **the** first type."

"Parents need to understand it's detrimental to keep kids safe in a negative way; to protect them from feeling consequences, from being hurt, from being unhappy."

"It's a matter of kids having respect for their parents - kids don't because parents don't hold them accountable."

"Kids are making terrible decisions, and parents don't know how to deal with them."

"Most parents want their kids to blend in with others. When they drink or smoke (pot), **the** parents turn a blind eye." (This from a student at Darien High School).

**The** images we are left with from **the** now infamous hockey game are a near perfect snapshot of what can happen when parents fail to be parents: serious substance abuse, anti-social behavior and violence.

Again, who is accountable? An editorial in **The** Darien Times said it perfectly. **The** following are some excerpts.

"Sportsmanship is about respect, and that's what's being lost here. While some parents are quick to blame coaches, athletic directors, **the** operators of **the** rink and police for what happened Saturday, **the** true issue starts at home. Respect is learned at home. It can be reinforced by positive role models, but **the** greatest impact will be by **the** example set by parents. Those who conducted themselves in an inexcusable manner Saturday night are responsible for their own actions. But where did they learn such disrespect for their fellow man?"

An editorial in **the** Darien News-Review reflected on **the** behavior of students from Darien and New Canaan who "are supposed to be **the** elite - **the** model of class (who) fill **the** classrooms of **the** Ivy League and other top Eastern colleges."

**The** editorial compared **the** behavior of fans at an FCIAC championship basketball game **the** night before. "Fans of Trinity Catholic, a Stamford school, and Harding, which draws from some of **the** most economically depressed neighborhoods in Bridgeport, absolutely packed **the** gym. They cheered loudly, witnessed an emotional, back-and-forth game, and comported themselves like ladies and gentlemen."

**The** Human Services Planning Council is working on a multi-faceted plan to focus awareness on **the** importance of respect and accountability. As a start, perhaps we should pay more attention to **the** Golden Rule, which is not, as someone I know likes to joke, "He who has **the** gold makes **the** rules".

You know what it is. If you don't, ask your neighbor.

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