



Looking for a HERO in Our Midst

by Melanie G. Snyder

Visualize a hero. Is it a well-known and widely recognized person, such as Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Teresa or Gandhi? Is it a sports figure or celebrity? What is a hero? And who deserves to be called one?

In 1939, Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Fifth Edition, gave this definition: in mythology, a man, honored after death by public worship because of exceptional service to mankind and usually held to be, in part at least, of divine descent; also a person of distinguished valor or fortitude; a central personage taking an admirable part in any remarkable action or event; hence a person regarded as a model.

Fifty years later, Webster's New World Dictionary simply defined hero as "any person admired for courage, nobility, etc."

Does this reflect a "watering down" of society's definition of hero? Articles in prominent magazines and newspapers have lamented that society's definition of "hero" has become so watered down that many people, children especially, consider pop stars and spoiled athletes as their "heroes."

Recent natural disasters and tragedies at home and abroad have provided us with a new model of a hero – everyday men and women who responded with bravery and compassion in a disaster. Many of these people did not think of themselves as heroic. But when the time came to act, they did. The world needs more of these kinds of heroes, people who demonstrate exceptional courage in times of crisis.

But another type of hero is even more essential to our very survival as human beings and without whom we could no longer exist. A type of hero not recognized in any dictionary. A type of hero present throughout history. A type of hero who walks among us every day without acknowledgement or recognition.

These are the people who go about their daily lives reaching out to others, lending a helping hand, showing kindness, being considerate and conscientious, using their own talents and abilities to make small daily differences in the world. Everyday people – my heroes.

The potential to be this type of hero resides in every one of us. We can make a serious and lasting difference in the world.

Too often we allow ourselves to get overwhelmed by the enormity of the world's problems – and we allow that to stall us.

One person is not likely to single-handedly bring about world peace, end homelessness or hunger or poverty, reverse the trends of pollution or animal extinction. But one person can use his or her own talents and abilities to make everyday small differences that add up.

The Random Acts of Kindness movement was built on this foundation – that one small act, one small good deed can call forth another and another. It is the "Pay It Forward" principle that a chain of good deeds started by one person, with one small gesture, can ultimately affect millions. The Random Acts of Kindness Foundation has a simple goal: "To demonstrate the extraordinary power and importance of simple human kindness by promoting the practice of kind acts, large and small, on a regular basis."

The reach of this kindness movement is worldwide. The foundation is the United States' delegate to the World Kindness Movement, an organization that includes more than 15 countries and people from all walks of life, committed to spreading kindness. With war, genocide, and other violence in the daily news, at no time in our world's history has basic kindness been more necessary or potentially more powerful.

So what is a hero? And who deserves to be called one?

The definition I like best is the one written by Nobel Prize winner and French pacifist Romain Rolland:

"A hero is a [person] who does what he [or she] can."

By doing what we can, we can make a difference. The everyday people who are carrying forward the principle of basic human kindness are today's most important heroes. We encounter them every day. We have the potential to be one, every day.

Look around. Look in the mirror. And visualize a hero. □

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For more:

■ **Random Acts of Kindness Foundation.** Its website contains free downloadable materials, ideas and resources for individuals, service clubs, educators, schools, faith groups and others to promote kindness. *Take Note: Feb. 15 - 21 is Random Acts of Kindness Week!* www.actsofkindness.org

■ **World Kindness Movement.** Find resources and a place to share inspiring stories of how simple acts of kindness are making a difference around the world. www.worldkindness.org.sg

Community Superheroes

by Melanie Wagner

Collette McDonald

For many moms and dads, 5:30 in the morning is time for staggering out of bed to turn on the coffeemaker. For Collette McDonald and the members of Atlanta's "Recession-Free Boot Camp," it's time for pushups, lunges and grueling uphill sprints. McDonald founded the informal north Atlanta neighborhood boot camp a year ago in response to the unexpected death of a friend's husband.

"Collette wanted to give her neighbor the gift of healthy living, not only for herself, but for her two children," says Meredyth Gaynes, a friend of McDonald's. "She charges for her boot camp – but not money. Instead, she charges the members with offering positive feedback and words of support to motivate ourselves."

McDonald was a boot camp instructor for four years before she started holding complimentary classes in her back yard. What started as a once-a-week free class for neighbors transitioned into a rigorous program for about 20

friends. The group now meets four days a week for 45 minutes, rain or shine (though the sun doesn't rise until the end of their workouts), and members must commit to a month of classes when they join.

To join McDonald's boot camp, participants must be invited by a member of the group, which has created a close network of friends and neighbors. The members are a mix of men and women of varying ages and athletic abilities.

"What's great about our group is that we have some men who can run a six-minute mile and some women who can run a 14-minute mile, but we all support each other," McDonald says. "We've turned into our own best social networking group. We help each other find jobs, recommend everything from doctors to dry cleaners, and watch each other's kids as often as we can."

Beyond the boot camp, McDonald is a real estate agent and mother of two boys, ages 8 and 6. The modest mom insists that the dedicated



group is what motivates her to get out of bed at 5 a.m. Yet McDonald, who teaches by the motto "strong, not skinny," says the friends' commitment to each other is more inspiring than any pound lost from exercising.

"Collette has a job, real estate, that not many would envy these days," Gaynes says. "What we do envy is her ability to carry herself and others during the tough times. She pushes us beyond our limits to be healthy, to knock out one more pushup or to run a little harder up that hill. Seriously, Wonder Woman has nothing on Collette! She's made me work harder to be a better woman."