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Promoting peace in and out of the classroom

By Pamela Hale, Religion Columnist
Long Beach Press Telegram

"Peace on earth." "Can't we all get along?" Stop the violence. Don't do drugs.

How often have we heard these words or said them to our children?

For PeacePartners Inc., a well-known anti-violence youth program, it has become the mission to see that such statements come to pass.

The initial program which was founded in 1992 by Dr. Dennis Embry, other educators, parents and psychologists in Arizona, was purchased by PeacePartners in 2003 and today is located in 30 U.S. states, Saipan, a territory of the United States, and one province of Canada. The organization's corporate office is in Long Beach.

The PeaceBuilders program is dedicated to reaching and teaching adults the art of creating safe, positive environments for all children across North America and U.S. territory.

The federally funded Safe and Drug-Free Schools Act is a community-based program, pre-K-12, that shifts the classroom and campus climate to a peaceful, productive and safe place for children, parents, teachers and the community.

Claudette Powers, a retired educator, is the PeaceBuilders' Peace Ambassador. She travels throughout the United States sharing the message of PeaceBuilders with teachers, parents and children alike.

"It teaches children a new way to live, how to get along and problem solve showing them that they have some choice in what happens around them and they can affect others by responding negatively or positively," says Powers. "It helps them to look for positive things in others. It helps children to be able to determine the kind of behavior that helps people to succeed."

With the violence and unrest in some of today's schools, it's important that children are secure in the learning environment.

"PB helps them to feel safe. They feel they can trust the people around them, friends and adults. They don't feel they have to fight battles," says Powers. "It empowers children, and it helps them to want to take responsibility for their actions and for the environmental shift that takes place in their lives. It makes them want to come to school."

PeaceBuilders, which currently has 600 sites, encourages the use of character qualities, ensuring peaceful relations between students, teachers and parents. Thus making it more than just another school project.

"It's not a curriculum set aside to be done aside from everything. It is an umbrella under which we operate every day," says Powers. "Wherever conflict comes up, there's a place for PB. It's not conflict that takes away peace, it's our response to conflict that takes it away. PB teaches us to respond to conflict in a nonviolent way. The program is for every person alive."

Some of the PeaceBuilders objectives include: increasing academic achievement, reducing episodes of serious violence and fighting injuries, reducing behavioral issues in a structured setting and increasing teaching time and reducing discipline time.

These objectives are accomplished through the six principles of PB: Praise people, give up put-downs, seek wise people, notice hurts, right wrongs and help others.

According to Powers, who's been with the program for nine years, making a difference in the lives of people makes it all worthwhile.

"I'm in it for the kids, and the adults will be able to relax because they'll have more positive times with kids," says Powers. "We are in it to help children past the time they have in school. I'd like people to know that PB is more than a program; it is a way of life. It teaches people skills that will help them learn to be builders of peace wherever they are," says Powers.

The program also teaches discipline.

"The entire time I was Assistant Principal I was teaching children discipline," says Powers. "I was teaching them how to discipline themselves. I would tell them 'You have to behave in a way now so you can have what you want five years from now.'"

PeaceBuilders, simply put, teaches the basic moral standards for living peaceably together with others.

"This is not a faith-based program, however, the principles are what every faith I've studied strives for," says Powers. "The Bible tells us to build each other up. And although we can't go into the schools and tell them 'The bible says ...' we can tell them to praise one another. We teach children how to help each other and teach them what helping others means."

According to PeaceBuilders representatives, it fits perfectly into any learning environment.

"(PB) is easily implemented into any program. By adults modeling PB principles every day, children learn what being a PeaceBuilder is because children do what we do, not what we say," says Powers. "We do parent and teacher training. We've trained schools and boys and girls club. We tell them to stop being angry at kids for doing what children do."

Examples are also very important in order for PB to be successful.

"We, as adults, have to mean what we say, but we don't have to say it mean. We have to follow through and be consistent," says Powers. "We have to model, model, model. When the adult changes, the children change."

Powers, who herself decided to have a family first, took 18 years to finish college. After receiving a BA in Sociology and Early Childhood Education, she went on to teach, from there she became an Assistant Principal, retiring after 25 years in education.

"I think this is a ministry and God really wants me to do this. When I retired I wanted to travel. God gave me a job where (I travel) and all my expenses are paid," she says. "My story to kids is: It's never too late. Go back to school."

PeaceBuilders will host an introduction event at their corporate office for teachers, parents and any adult who provides care for or works with children in any way.

The event, "A Little Peace for You." will be March 15, 6–8 p.m. at the PB office, 236 E. 3rd St., Suite 217, in Long Beach. Cost is \$20 per person pre-pay and \$25 on site.

For more information on PB visit www.peacebuilders.com or call (562) 590-3600.

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