

Bringing out the best in people

Jill shares a special moment with a happy couple.

ABOUT 13 YEARS AGO, JILL KENNEDY (‘72) LEARNED A UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE THAT HAS ENRICHED ALL ASPECTS OF HER LIFE – THAT OF THE INTERNATIONAL VIRTUES PROJECT.

Founded about 21 years ago in Canada, The Virtues Project initially captured the essence of the human spirit and content of the human character by describing 52 universal virtues, to help people throughout the world bring out the best in themselves and others. There was nothing new about these virtues, but what the founders offered the world were five simple strategies to help bring out these qualities in ourselves and others.

Initially developed for parents to use with families, The Virtues Project strategies are now used by educators, businesses and governments globally, including Methodist Ladies’ College. Jill became acquainted with the project while a teacher at All Saints’ College.

“The Principal saw my passion for values, which private schools are generally so proud of, and encouraged me to join a cross-section of educators from Christian, Jewish and Muslim schools across Perth to trial the teaching of an agreed set of values, which were refined and later became mandatory to be taught in Western Australian schools,” Jill said.

“Sometimes teachers don’t know how to teach values, so the strategies of The Virtues Project, published in a range of books and other resources, are so useful. Through implementing them, virtues enriched my teaching and enabled me to see the goodness in everyone.

“For example, when a child was taking time to check their work, I could say something like, ‘I can see you’re taking a lot of care to complete that work accurately.’

“When a student acted rashly or inappropriately, I would say, ‘What virtue was missing? How would you choose to speak and act next time?’ By working in this way, students

were given the opportunity to reflect on their behaviour and congratulate themselves for utilising virtues, or consider what they had learnt from the situation. The method avoids shaming, which inhibits learning,” Jill said.

In illustrating the difference between values and virtues, Jill said virtues are elemental qualities of character and the human spirit that are universally valued by all people, whereas values are generally culturally-specific.

“If we look at the media, our society generally values money, youthfulness, physical beauty, celebrity status, and power over others. It doesn’t necessarily make us people of virtue.”

When two of the three founding members of The Virtues Project visited Perth 13 years ago, Jill trained as a facilitator in recognition of the project’s usefulness in preventing bullying and building authentic self-esteem in students.

“I felt the project was a respectful approach to developing social and emotional intelligence. Now, having worked with the Project for many years, I can recognise a ‘teachable’ moment for others and myself, and when faced with a challenge or mess-up, I see an opportunity to ‘grow’ a virtue. It is useful for children and

adults, alike. We are all a work in progress.”

While The Virtues Project has been successfully implemented in a range of social settings throughout the world, it is based on the inherent ‘goodness’ of the human spirit, including virtues such as kindness, tolerance, excellence, friendliness, honesty, creativity and tact.

As a Master Facilitator, Jill draws on her formal qualifications in education and psychology, combined with her calm outlook on life, to conduct workshops for schools and businesses, parents and students throughout the State. She also benefits greatly from the valuable support and experience of a global network of facilitators in more than 100 countries, and she has been entrusted with the honour of coordinating The Virtues Project Global Mentorship Conference in Perth from 26 to 29 November.

Jill facilitates others to use the five strategies of The Virtues Project by:

- Speaking the language of virtues to acknowledge, educate, correct and thank others;
- Recognising teachable moments as opportunities to grow in virtue;
- Setting clear boundaries to know what we stand for, and making suitable amends when those boundaries are overstepped;
- Honouring the spirit by respecting, expressing and reflecting upon the unique qualities in ourselves and others; and
- Offering the art of companionship as a powerful counselling strategy.

“Appraisals and evaluations have identified many ways in which The Virtues Project has changed people’s lives by

helping them see their worth and recognising a purpose in their lives. That’s what this has given me; I use courage to overcome my fears and inhibitive feelings to share myself with groups of people. It’s a bit like ‘service above self,’” Jill said.

In her other role as a registered civil marriage celebrant, Jill uses virtues to honour the spirit of the couple being married.

“People in Western societies lack rituals and ceremonies in their lives, and that’s not good because they’re generally important occasions for acknowledging success, achievements and life transitions,” Jill said.

“Being a celebrant is such a joyous role and I find the language of virtues so powerful when I meet couples; I give a voice to the personal qualities that attracted them to each other and use the language of virtues as a lovely way of introducing the couple’s story and hopes to guests at their weddings.

“I particularly look forward to the opportunity to participate in baby welcoming ceremonies in which friends and family come together to welcome a baby and make a commitment to help foster positive qualities in the child. It’s a lovely alternative to traditional religious ceremonies.”

Jill said she became interested in training as a celebrant because she loved the idea of creating a unique and special ceremony. “Some people appreciate the freedom of writing their own ceremonies, while others ask me to write their ceremony, including a blessing which embraces their hopes for the future. I love doing that.”

To utilise Jill’s services as a celebrant or Virtues Project Master Facilitator, email jillik@bigpond.com

Members of the public are welcome to attend an introductory lecture by the founders of The Virtues Project between 7 and 9pm on 26 November, in the Social Sciences Lecture Theatre at the University of Western Australia. Cost: \$30.



Jill and The Virtues Project co-founder, Linda Kavelin Popov, during one of her visits to Perth.