

POINTS OF VIEW

A village can work to help its children

They appear between 4 and 4:15 p.m., help themselves to pop and pretzels and take a seat at a long, boardroom-like table.

Polite, polite, enthusiastic, energetic are these 25 seventh graders belying the myth that middle school students are necessarily difficult.

They are part of the first 21st Century Leaders group — which meets twice monthly after school at The Community House in Birmingham.

The school-year-long program is mainly the brainchild of Judy Hoeffer, who said she took as a personal challenge a 1994 Eccentric column extolling efforts by the city of Troy on behalf of its young people.

The column began, "It takes a whole village to raise a child, according to an old adage." And it read in part: "Instead of the don'ts, Troy is emphasizing the do's. . . More communities need to do the same."

Hoeffer, the new executive director of Oakland County Child Abuse and Neglect Council, began her quest by

chairing a Children's Issues Committee sponsored by The Community House.

"What we heard over and over again was pay attention to the middle school," said Hoeffer, who's married to Birmingham Public Schools' Superintendent John Hoeffer.

They eventually came up with a middle school leadership program for "kids who normally wouldn't have a chance to come together."

Hoeffer, on a volunteer basis, wrote the curriculum and chairs the sessions. A mini-grant from Chrysler Corporation pays for expenses including assistant Michelle Pryslak.

The kids represent 12 public and private middle schools in Birmingham, Bloomfield Hills and Southfield. "We wanted leaders, but not necessarily the ones who are always tapped," Hoeffer said.

Right now, these 21st Century Leaders are more than half way through their year-long discovery of leadership skills; of various social, economic and



JUDITH DONER BERNE

cultural experiences; and of training in problem-solving, organizational and communication skills.

As in adult leadership programs, such as Leadership Oakland and Leadership Detroit, they are examining institutions and concepts both through community representatives and through hands-on projects.

"They've taken on art and symbols" and how an art show is put together. Two weeks later, they toured the DIA. They've donned athletic clothes for some aerobic conditioning as they

learned the importance to leadership of a sound body and mind. Two weeks later, they toured the nearby Beaumont Rehabilitation and Health Care Center.

They've heard about the world of a foster child from an Orchard's Children's Services social worker. And they brought stuffed animals as holiday gifts for foster children.

I attended two sessions on the world of business. After hearing several people in different businesses talk about what it takes to succeed in business, the kids hit the road to evaluate Birmingham's retail community.

"The leader has the vision to see things as they should be, might be," said Hoeffer as she sent them on their way.

The worlds of government, reaching out to others and a final group outreach project are still to come.

"The kids say they're getting a lot out of the experience. "I'm learning things I didn't know

about the community," says Paul Dorset, from Birmingham.

"I learned how lucky I am to have a family," said Adam Zussman, of Huntington Woods.

"It's learning about leadership — about making correct decisions and about knowing the needs and what's going on," said Steve Saraguse, from Southfield.

This is a program that not only deserves to continue, but that other communities should be lining up to model. The curriculum is there and can easily be tailored to fit your hometown.

It can be run by qualified volunteers and takes little money to implement.

It certainly seems like one way a village can help a child.

Judith Doner Berne, a West Bloomfield resident, is former managing editor of the *Eccentric* newspaper. You can leave her a message at (313) 953-2047, ext. 1997 or write or fax a letter to the editor of this newspaper.

Voters flunk judicial civics test at the polls

If 90 percent of Michigan schoolkids flunked their fourth-, seventh- and 11th-grade MEAP tests, schools and kids would face parental wrath. There would be thunderous breast-beating and howls for more intensive teaching of "the basics."

But hardly anyone raised an eyebrow when Michigan adults flunked a civics test about the third branch of government, the judiciary. Items:

■ 90 percent couldn't name a single justice of the state Supreme Court.

■ No single justice was named by more than 7 percent of the electorate. Jim Brickley, Michael Cavanagh and Conrad Mallett Jr. were identified by 7 percent; Patricia Boyle, Elizabeth Weaver, Charles Levin and Dorothy Comstock Riley by 6 percent.

■ 93 percent didn't know how many justices there are (seven).

Since I'm not running for public office, I can afford to tell the truth. The overwhelming majority of Michigan voters are so uninformed that they

shouldn't be casting ballots for the Supreme Court.

Yet 86 percent of voters thought that Supreme Court justices should continue to be elected. People can be just as stupid as politicians.

The survey was conducted by the Alliance for Judicial Accountability, a nice cover name for the Michigan Chamber of Commerce, Michigan Manufacturers Association and a bunch of medical professional groups. They have an axe to grind because they get sued by unions, consumers and patients. Yet AJA's questions and results seem honest enough.

State Bar president Thomas G. Kienbaum, of Franklin, is giving a lot of thought and magazine ink to the question of "merit selection" of judges — a system that would involve appointment followed, in a couple of years, by a judge's facing voters for a "yes" or "no" decision on continuing in office.



TIM RICHARD

Obviously, Kienbaum has an uphill battle. He should be encouraged.

Martin Doctoroff, chief judge of the state Court of Appeals, leans in that direction. On last week's Channel 56 "Off the Record," Doctoroff had good things to say about merit selection.

Doctoroff, of Birmingham, was appointed by a Democratic governor but tends to be conservative, scholarly and fair-minded. Yet he had the innards

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scared out of him in a recent election by an obscure lawyer with little to recommend him beyond a gorgeous Irish name.

In truth, people vote for names. The Michigan Manual Index lists 11 Kellys, 11 McDonalds, 10 Brennans, seven O'Donnells, seven O'Briens, five O'Neills, and so on; mostly Irish, but there are a few good Jewish names, too, like Levin and Kaufman.

Or as Tom Kienbaum puts it, "Irrelevant name recognition will continue to be the single most significant factor in the judicial election process, particularly in large population areas." And: "There is no chance for any real comparison of records of incumbents versus those of challengers, let alone incumbent versus incumbent. The result is an enormous waste of judicial energy and resources. . . ."

Clearly, we should be appointing appellate judges. But how do you make changes when adults who flunk civics tests still think they're good at electing them?

Tim Richard reports on the local implications of state and regional events.

'V-chip' offers protection, not censorship for viewers

Hannah Arendt was one of the best political philosophers of my generation. She studied Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia to distill the core of totalitarianism. In a famous phrase, she concluded the distinguishing character of totalitarian political systems — what made them so awful — was the "banality of evil."

Evil, in other words, is so shot through totalitarian societies that it becomes the expected, the norm, the ordinary, the banal.

The phrase echoed in my mind last week in connection with kids and violence and television. The evidence keeps piling up that:

■ Kids (not to mention their parents) watch a lot of TV.

■ Violence "predominates on television," according to the just-released, largest-ever study. By the time an average child finishes elementary school, he will have seen 8,000 murders and 100,000 acts of violence on TV.

■ No less than seven U.S. and Canadian scientific studies demonstrate a "correlation between prolonged childhood exposure to TV and a tendency to physical aggression that extends from before adolescence into adulthood."

In other words, watching violent TV makes it more likely that kids will be violent.

The effect of today's television of violence is so pervasive, so normal, so ordinary that it has become banal. Misusing Arendt's phrase, "television propagates the banality of violence."

That's why I was so encouraged to see the big telecommunications bill that passed Congress last week requires "V-chip" technology to be installed on all TV sets manufactured two years hence. The V-chip is a computer chip that manufacturers will place inside TV sets that allows parents to block violent or sexually explicit shows they feel are inappropriate for their kids.

To work, the V-chip requires a rating system indicating various levels of violence or sexuality be embedded in various programs. The V-chip would be programmed to block shows whose ratings are above levels set by parents.

U.S. Rep. John Dingell, D-Mich., whose committee has been looking at TV and violence for years, commented: "All we are doing is seeking to give parents the ability to control what their



PHILIP POWER

children watch on television. It is a way of giving parents control without censorship."

Not surprisingly, the television industry is asking a court to declare the V-chip illegal censorship, an unconstitutional violation of the First Amendment free speech guarantees.

Ho, hum. That's nothing more than a predictable (and self-interested) reaction of an industry traditionally more interested in selling advertising time than in promoting freedom of speech.

Tell me, is it censorship when I tell my 13-year-old son Nathan that he can't watch certain shows? Of course not. So how is my decision as a parent to program the V-chip an unconstitutional intrusion on my son's viewing habits?

And just why is it the constitutional right of the entertainment and broadcasting industries to bring in to my house — without my explicit permission, but certainly at their profit — programming that is banally violent and which, at the very minimum, tends to coarsen my son to violence?

Should parents be more actively involved with their children's TV viewing than merely programming a V-chip? Sure. But many working parents don't have much choice.

And when Kathy and I went to a dinner party at a friend's house last Friday night, I would have been a lot more comfortable about what Nathan was watching at home on TV if there had been a V-chip in the set.

Phil Power is chairman of the company that owns this newspaper. His Touch-Tone voice mail number is (313) 953-2047, Ext. 1880.

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