

The Times

EDITORIALS

A world of real role models

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BY LYNNE AZARCHI

Recent headlines about famous baseball figures and their performance-enhancing drug abuse should not come as a shock to us. The challenge facing parents and fans alike is dealing with yet another wake-up call regarding values, celebrity and what it means to be a role model in today's tabloid world. How is it that the famous, the infamous and the notorious -- including sports "celebrities" -- have assumed positions in our collective mind as role models? When did the line blur between hero and role model, and celebrity?

Our children, teens and young adults need not be crestfallen at the demise of a favorite athlete if they are made aware of a world full of real role models, very few of whom ever get air time or exposure on magazine covers. For our future generations, we need to more clearly distinguish between role models and celebrities -- and do so now.

Let's start with the basics. A role model is defined as a person whose behavior, example, or success is or can be emulated by others, especially by younger people. Acceptable behavior used to be based on two elements that seemed to be broadly shared by teachers, parents and society in general -- good values and accountability. Behavior and consequences were direct reflections of one another, at least for the most part.

Check your headlines today -- accountability has been severely watered down and we have made heroes and role models of gang bangers, drug dealers, movie stars, corrupt politicians, predatory business leaders and out-of-control post-adolescent actors and musicians.

We need to look beyond the television, tabloids, baseball stadiums and sports arenas to actually find the thousands of people worth emulating.

Let's assume for a moment that the lives and experiences of people we venerate from the past are adequately taught in school. It therefore is incumbent on us to instruct our children about role models who make a difference today. Available is a plethora of adult and child role models, though most are not acclaimed, some of them even having died in sacrifice for social justice. Relatively few people have ever heard of the heroes that should inspire us today.

In Russia, where journalists risk their lives to report real news, Anna Stepanovna Politkovskaya was a Russian journalist and human rights activist well-known for her opposition to the Chechen conflict and Russian president Vladimir Putin. She was arrested, subjected to mock execution by Russian military forces and poisoned, but survived and continued her reporting. Anna received numerous prestigious international awards for her work. She was shot dead in the elevator of her apartment building in October 2006.

Dan Eldon, a Reuter's photographer, was stoned to death in Somalia by an angry mob reacting to the U.N. bombing raid on the suspected headquarters of a warlord. He was 22. When Dan was 14, he started a fund-raising campaign for open-heart surgery to save the life of a young Kenyan girl. At 15, he helped support a Masai family by buying their hand-made jewelry, later selling it to fellow students and friends. In high school, Dan held charity fund-raising dances in his back yard. There, scores of students paid an entrance fee that went toward Dan's latest charity. Always looking for a way to raise funds, he also produced colorful T-shirts of his own design.

By the age of 16, Gerson Andrés Flórez Pérez had already dedicated his life to achieving peace in his home country of Colombia. He was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize and has been honored for his years of work for peace in Colombia and in the world.

One need not die to be heroic or a role model, just act with conviction in support of values and behave accordingly -- whether there is a camera watching or not.

At 14, William Kamkwamba of Malawi learned that he would no longer be able to continue his schooling. His family couldn't afford to pay the school fees, so William took on the task of educating himself. Using books as guides, William designed a power-generating windmill for his family using mostly salvaged materials: wooden poles, broken pipes, old shoes, copper wires and his father's old bicycle. With no electricity in his village, all lighting was done by candle. William's windmill would mean electric light.

Anthony Leanna, at the very young age of 10, started his own community service project. He decided to start the Heavenly Hats Foundation after spending a lot of time in hospitals when his grandmother had breast cancer. He saw that many of the patients had lost their hair and he wanted to do something to help. Anthony and his Heavenly Hats program have donated more than 50,000 brand- new hats (almost \$1 million worth of head wear) to more than 150 hospitals and clinics.

Current headlines should remind us that there is a teaching and a learning opportunity. Seize it and inspire your children to know what it takes to be a real role model. Go to the library to check out books on role models and heroes and read them to your kids. Go on-line and visit some of our favorite hero/role model Web sites: myhero.com; heroes.com; family.samhsa.gov/be/ and giraffe.org, which features a Kids Only section.

The world is full of adults and children who are making a difference. Tell your children that one person can make a difference. Tell them about the "domino effect" -- how one person can inspire others and create great change. Share stories about those who inspire you by doing community service in your home town. Discuss real role models and what it actually means to be a hero in your home for our future, for our communities.

A compelling role model said, "A life is not important except in the impact it has on other lives." Who said that? Why, Jackie Robinson, of course. Now there was a role model.

Lynne Azarchi is executive director of Kidsbridge (www.kidsbridge-museum.org). Kidsbridge has created a tolerance museum aka. learning lab on campus at The College of New Jersey, which features the exhibit "Face to Face: Dealing with Prejudice and Discrimination," and includes additional exhibits on role models, heroes, community service and sensitivity to persons with disabilities. Each year, the museum is visited by elementary and middle schoolers, day campers, teachers, leadership groups, Boy/Girl Scouts and faith groups. Kidsbridge conducts an annual competition for community service and provides other character education and diversity appreciation programs.