

THE ST INTERVIEW

Don't force students to do good

Advocate believes in making community service inspiring instead of compulsory



BY TAN HUI YEE
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EDUCATION these days is being broadened to give students firmer grounding in sports, art, music and communication. It is also heading out of the classroom – making it hard to graduate here without digging a well in Vietnam, building a school in Cambodia, or jiggling tin cans to raise funds for charity.

With the spotlight on learning through community service – or service learning – one would expect advocates to want it made mandatory, but not Ms Ann Medlock. She thinks this “compulsory” approach is all wrong.

“It’s a shame. It makes it a chore and a drudgery. It ought to be a great joy and that happens only when kids figure it out themselves,” says the 76-year-old founder of the United States-based Giraffe Heroes Project, an organisation that honours those who “stick their necks out for the common good” in publications and online.

The 26-year-old organisation runs on a simple premise: By honouring and airing stories of people who show courage in solving their community’s problems, it inspires others to do the same. Some of the people it has highlighted – including Dr Muhammad Yunus, founder of the microloan-focused Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, as well as Professor Wangari Maathai, who founded the conservation Green Belt Movement in Kenya – have gone on to win the Nobel Peace Prize.

In town recently for the Women In The Community: Change Movers conference organised by the Singapore Management University’s Wee Kim Wee Centre and supported by the Shirin Fozdar Trust Fund, the writer drew wows from the audience with her stories.

They included: A homemaker who became mayor to rid her city of mob control; a teacher who risked torture to educate girls; and a cheerleader who risked ridicule by fielding a cheer team with physical and learning disabilities.

She tells The Straits Times: “We tell kids stories of people who are doing these kinds of things and then we say, ‘Who do you know is like that? Find a story and tell us.’ By that time, almost inevitably, they are saying, ‘I could do something like this.’”

One American school teacher, she says, arranged for his students to clean up a neighbourhood park one day. “The kids called him a slave-driver...they hid in the park instead of cleaning it up.” A few years later, the same teacher started telling another class stories of extraordinary people from the Giraffe Heroes archive. “The kids decided they wanted to clean up the same park. The teacher was

laughing and crying at the same time. He said, ‘I couldn’t get them to stop. They were painting things, they were clearing the trash, they were trimming trees. They just wouldn’t stop.’”

Service learning plugs the gaps created by school systems which “isolate children from the rest of the world”, she says. It also frees students from the constraints of the classroom, where “we make them sit still in little chairs and not talk and not move and they are so bored they want to die”.

She concedes that the Giraffe Heroes’ “sneaky” approach of leading by inspiration is unlikely to take off among the school authorities who have decided that service learning is too much of a good thing to be left optional.

But she pleads: “Give them choices... If you say to them ‘What do you care about? What do you see in your family, or on the streets that might need some fixing?’ and let them choose what to do, they will be very creative, committed and involved.”

Her organisation, which has commended more than 1,000 Giraffe Heroes in every US state and in 27 countries, recognises individuals for the personal risks they take for the larger good. Those hanging on to the status quo usually consider them “crackpots”.

But these mavericks, she says, are easily identifiable. “You know it when you see it, unless you are the power being threatened. If people are acting out of compassion and they are being very brave about that, that’s attractive to most of us. We admire it. We are thrilled by it.”

Ultimately, people gravitate towards these “spark plugs”, who are valuable for “coalescing energy around an idea”.

These visionaries are especially important for consensus-seeking societies like Singapore, where people eschew confrontation. Without them, a society would have no checks against abuse. “You have to be very sure that the directions you are following are ones that you can honour and respect and follow with dignity,” she says.

“I had always thought that I would make an excellent benevolent empress because I would do things for the common good,” she shares with a mischievous glimmer in her eyes. “But an awful lot of people who have been thought to be kind and compassionate leaders have turned out to be not very good at that. Power does have its damaging effects on people. I might turn into a terrible tyrant.”

The former English editor of Viet Nam Presse news agency and editor-in-chief of Children’s Express says she was driven to collect inspiring stories in the 1980s because she was “very distressed” by the gloom and doom that has become the trademark of mainstream journalism.

“I think it’s bred in journalism schools, the idea that if there is a disaster, that’s the best thing we could possibly talk about. There’s a feeling that ‘if I do a story like this, I am important, what I’m doing is really on the edge.’”

Moving away from the gloom-and-doom approach does not mean writing only about good news. Previous attempts to provide services focusing on good news have been “rather trivial and amusing and I just don’t think that’s realistic”.

She declines to name the outfits she



Ms Ann Medlock, founder of US-based Giraffe Heroes Project, believes that learning through community service plugs the gaps created by school systems which “isolate children from the rest of the world”. ST PHOTO: LAU FONG KONG

has in mind because they are defunct and “I don’t want to kick the corpses”. But she notes that such attempts have now morphed into “the stuff that follows a half-hour TV report of horrors – something utterly silly like a poodle riding a bicycle. It’s supposed to make people feel better, I guess”.

The superior way, she says, is to “face what’s real” but include the solutions. This means, for example, journalists highlighting groups like the School of Dance and Social Integration for Children and Adolescents (Edisca) which tries to change the lives of slum dwellers when talking about the favelas, or shanty towns, in Brazil.

“Give me an idea of how it might work. Don’t just tell me how awful it is.”

In this regard, the rising penetration of the Internet is a boon. It allows stories of hope to be easily disseminated and accessed by those weary of the usual stories of death and destruction. That is, if one can get past the enormous amount of “noise” online.

“There are people who go, ‘I’m at the corner of Fifth and Main Street and I’m going to make Egg Fuyong for dinner.’ Good Lord, shut up. Just keep quiet, because you are clogging the airwaves.”

The contributor to the established American news and opinion website Huffington Post admits she gets puzzled by people who wring their hands over what to write for their blogs. “If you don’t have an idea, don’t say anything. You don’t have to beat on yourself to make up something to talk about.”

Given that some Singapore politicians now give updates of their whereabouts through social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, are they then adding to this noise?

“At least they’re not saying ‘I am having doughnuts for breakfast’,” she shoots back. “That really makes me crazy.”

The nature of the game is slightly different for politicians, she says, because they need to be accessible to do their job well. “On Facebook, people talk back to you. I think it’s important, if you were in a position like that, to open yourself to having people talk back to you.”

The process “might be a little humbling as well as instructive”.

“People tend to be very frank in their (Facebook) comments and I think a lot of important people are not used to having other people speak frankly to them.”

Such platforms are also important to gather instant feedback. If a politician an-

nounces online that he is visiting a particular block in his ward, “somebody could say ‘what are you going there for? People there don’t need you. You should come over here’.”

“So you could get a discussion going with your constituents, which could be a very good thing.”

She notes that these days, even the laptop is going out of fashion as young people increasingly surf the Internet on their mobile phones. To engage them on issues, “you’d better be brief and you’d better show up on their phones”.

“It is fascinating to me to watch how quickly this is all changing.”

Not that she observes these trends passively. Within days of returning to the US after this interview, the mother of four and grandmother of 10 sends this reporter an e-mail with details of her Facebook profile, her blog address and adds her to a mailing list which receives her monthly updates.

“I have a thing about not adding to all the Noise, but from time to time, I do send out what I hope is a Signal,” she writes. Ultimately, good content still matters on the Internet. “It’s a question of using it ethically, wisely and not filling it up with trash.”

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Writer and curriculum developer

MS ANN Medlock, 76, is the founder and vice-chairman of the Giraffe Heroes Project, a non-profit organisation that encourages good citizenship by highlighting individuals who take risks for the common good.

It maintains a database of hundreds of these people from the United States, as well as countries like Vietnam, Malaysia and Bangladesh.

The heroes it has commended range from Nobel Peace Prize winners like Grameen Bank founder Muhammad Yunus to gutsy lawyers like Malaysian Meenakshi Raman who fought for the rights of villagers threatened by industrial waste, and American homemakers like Eleanor Kesim who ran for mayor to rid her home city of Elkhart, Indiana, of mob control.

Ms Medlock, who earned a magna cum laude in English from the University of Maryland, edited the then Saigon-based Viet Nam Presse news agency in the 1950s, as well as the formerly Manhattan-headquartered Children’s Express news service which relied on children and teenagers to deliver the news. She also developed curricula for educational groups Macmillan and Science Research Associates (now SRA/McGraw-Hill) and has done freelance writing for publications like The New York Times, The Journal of Commerce and New Age Journal.

Ms Medlock is married to Mr John Graham, 67, the Giraffe Heroes’ principal speaker and workshop leader. They live in Washington state in the US.

I taught my son to question authority

Q Singapore is reviewing its social studies curriculum to incorporate some understanding of local politics. What do you think social studies should educate youth about?

I hope there is a good deal of truth-telling. One of the most popular books in the United States is a book called Lies My Teachers Told Me by James W. Loewen, because the social studies that we had was pretty much fiction. All kinds of things were simplified and whitewashed and difficult things absolutely denied. America’s role when it is not admirable, the things that we have done in our history that are not good – they were very rarely mentioned in schools. The elimination of the indigenous people is barely mentioned. (Italian explorer)

Christopher Columbus was “a hero” – that is nonsense. He wasn’t even the first European to find the (American) continent. I hope that education is reality-based, not fiction-based.

Q Why do you think this whitewashing happens?

I wonder if any culture tells the whole truth. Maybe it’s just human to want to gloss over past wrongs and tell our children that we’ve always done the right thing. I’m afraid that the official version is always tidied up; it’s up to curious individuals to seek out the truth – if that even matters to them.

Q Who, in your opinion, should get to determine what

appears in textbooks?

We’re just going through a new textbook uproar in the US. A curriculum committee for the state of Texas has decreed a lot of material in history books they’ve screened to be unacceptable.

So the state of Texas is telling the publishers to change the books or lose sales to all of Texas – which is a very big place and means a huge loss of income for the publishers. For decades, Texas and California, being as large as they are, have affected what children all over the US are taught – the publishers say they can publish one version only of each text for the whole country.

Members of the Texas curriculum committee objected to the texts on non-academic – even uneducated –

grounds. Although we have a system of separation of church and state, these judges of public school materials were speaking as fundamentalist Christians. Getting members elected to key positions like these curriculum committees has been a national goal of many fundamentalist churches.

So it’s not a question of what’s right or of what should happen. It’s just the reality that people in power control what is taught.

I think the best we can hope for is that kids get the glimmer of an idea that there may be more to know than they’re being taught and that they do some independent learning.

Q Given these conditions, how did you educate your

children?

I was once called to meet one of my sons’ seventh-grade history teacher, a retired Marine officer who thought history was a list of battles fought.

He startled me by saying that he wanted me to make sure my son took off “that button” (they’re called “badges” in Singapore).

Since my son’s school jacket was covered with his collection of buttons, I asked his teacher which one.

He said: “The one that says ‘Question Authority.’”

I replied: “I gave it to him.”

The teacher probably wrote us both off as hopeless and I continued to give my son information about other things that humanity had done besides fight wars.