

Greetings!

*The Center for Youth Citizenship would like you to join us in helping to make character a part of every child's life and education. **Expect Character!***

*~Joseph P. Maloney, Executive Director*



## Restoring Character and Responsibility



Recently, the names Katrina and Rita have become all too familiar in households across the nation. Events described in the newspapers and covered by television bring vivid and graphic scenes from New Orleans and the Southern Coast that grab, shake and shock us no matter where we ourselves live. It was not that long ago that the terrorist attacks in New York City resulted in similar uncertainties, destruction and loss of life.

The effects of modern technology and its impact on communications have advanced our media's ability to bring the harsh occurrences and

realities of the world to us with an unprecedented speed, often leaving us with little time to prepare ourselves or filter what we are seeing. These graphic visualizations are as unbelievable as the loss and damage to families, startling impact on lives and landscape, and actual deaths. Regrettably, the real and potential threat of these types of natural and man made disasters are not over for our world, nation, state and communities. We must learn from these events and move forward. Challenged to be prepared, for ourselves and especially our children, we must expand both the quality and quantity of character and

- responsible citizenship to adequately address the future.

- Dr. Phil McGraw, a popular emotional and mental health expert, has already weighed in. He and others advise schools and families to watch for the emotional impact and potentially damaging effect of these disaster type events on children, warning us to watch especially for signs of anxiety and fear. Unable to ignore or completely block out the prevalent stories and images that invade all of us in our living rooms, we must be ready to deal with the impact of the new age realities and direct children and families to seek help when needed.

For those unable to afford this kind of service, the good doctor recommends referral to existing community and public supported mental health, social and counseling services and those services of faith-based organizations (formally called churches).

Master jazz musician Wynton Marsalis, writing recently in *Time* magazine, also shares his perspective on moving forward out of crisis. Marsalis pleads for all of us to listen and watch for a more spiritual message from the New Orleans disaster; one that re-examines the "soul of America" and our



commitments to multiculturalism and equity. His insight and positive rationale seems to be anchored in the diverse cultural perspectives that he discovered and came to know while living in New Orleans. He profoundly writes:

*“Let us assess the size of this cataclysm in cultural terms, not in dollars and cents or politics. Americans are far less successful at doing that because we have never understood how our core beliefs are manifest in culture – and how our culture should guide political and economic realities. That’s what the city of New Orleans can now teach the nation again as we are all forced by circumstance to literally come closer to one another.”*

The Center for Youth Citizenship views these tragedies in terms of what can be learned to advance the education of children. There is a great need to help our children build and develop both individual and collective character and citizenship. We are duty-bound to prepare all of our young citizens for the needed levels of responsibility of everyday life. Schools and communities must take leadership with their staff, families and service constituents in order to help guide adults on how to talk to our children about these all too common realities. These discussions must emphasize the development and practice of behaviors such as **compassion, empathy, cooperation and humanity**. We must encourage a return to much broader discussions about the need to help others that are, because of circumstance or tragedy, less fortunate than ourselves. Working together for the good of our common communities is now

both a matter of core principle and a practical consideration for survival. As recent events show us, individual and group behaviors can affect us all. It can impact us in either a positive or negative way and as individuals or communities.

**We don’t need to add a new program or course to teach these lessons.** In fact, there appears to be an inverse relationship between new “add-on,” “quick-fix,” or “magic bullet” programs and their positive impact on children, families, schools and communities.

Instead, the remedy is somewhat simple. What’s required is everyday leadership and citizenship! Little things, such as sending a newsletter article to parents reminding them to have family talks and discussions about these disasters and their impact on people like themselves. Talk positively about what individuals and communities can do to make a difference. Reconnect the generations by telling children those stories of past struggles and perseverance. Make sure your teachers use “moments” and opportunities to make a point that complement their existing lesson plans and curriculums. And as adults, let’s expect ourselves to be good “role models” of these traits that we want to see in others. Schools, families and communities must start working together and helping each other to reinforce core community values and behaviors!

There are groups that are responding to Katrina’s and Rita’s destruction by starting “help day” projects to assist and restore hope. The media has highlighted, to some degree, the noble actions of individuals

and groups in crisis situations. But the lessons that we must learn from Katrina and Rita and other national tragedies is that our responses and solutions cannot be “one shot” or “short-term.” Instead, we must commit to ensuring that the lessons we have learned are taught, reinforced and practiced daily, weekly, monthly and yearly by families, local schools and communities. They must become part of our individual and collective character and the everyday thinking on the responsibilities of all citizens.

Let’s keep the conversation about Katrina, Rita and other disasters, either past or future, alive. Working on long-term, broad and bold solutions is the “right” and practical thing to do. Problems, both big and small are at our doorsteps everyday. It will take character and responsibility from all of us to move forward from these tragedies and to handle the next ones around the corner. Our individual and collective futures depend on today’s “character based citizenship” discussions and lessons. **Let’s expect character and restore responsibility as a part of every child’s education and let’s start teaching by example and discussion!**

*Joseph P. Maloney is the Executive Director of the Center for Youth Citizenship (CYC). CYC believes that it is our duty to prepare and inspire our children to be responsible citizens committed to acting with character. Through Character-Based Citizenship™ programs and services, CYC helps schools and communities teach youth the fundamental behaviors, habits, skills and actions that prepare them for academic and community success and full participation in our democracy.*

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