

REACHING KIDS WITH LESSONS ON RESPECT

Arlene and Milt Berkman Use the Arts to Combat Bullying

By Liz Rothaus Bertrand

Moving to Cornelius was supposed to be the beginning of a quiet retirement for Blumenthal Performing Arts Producers Circle members Arlene and Milt Berkman. But instead of savoring the view of Lake Norman from their kitchen window, the two lifelong New Yorkers found themselves drawn to a high-energy project combining their passion for the arts and helping others. Together, they created an anti-bullying organization that uses the arts as a tool for social and emotional learning.

Shortly after arriving in 2009, Arlene Berkman, a former physical education and health teacher, kept hearing about bullying problems in news reports and from friends with school-age kids. When she also observed a group of children acting disrespectfully at their new synagogue, she decided it was time to do something about it.

This wasn't just an abstract interest for the Berkmans; they had personally experienced the traumatizing effects of bullying years earlier when their own son was targeted as a middle school student.

That had been a difficult and painful time for the family as they struggled to resolve the problem in their small and well-regarded school district in Westchester, New York. "I'll never forget that experience and what that felt like," says Arlene Berkman, "and that my son didn't want to talk about it."

That's why years later, when Arlene Berkman saw an opportunity to make a difference for other families in her new home state of North Carolina, she was ready for the challenge.

Initially, she worked with the principal of the Beth Shalom Hebrew school to develop a character education program revolving around music and the arts. They based their curriculum on Operation Respect, an anti-bullying organization started by Peter Yarrow of the famous folk trio Peter, Paul and Mary.

This little seed of an idea quickly blossomed into a full-fledged foundation with a much bigger mission.

Since 2011, the Respect Ability Foundation has worked with educators, students and families to create more caring communities. The organization has partnered with many area schools, including 18 in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. This school year, RAF will work with three elementary schools in the Mooresville



Arlene and Milt Berkman



The Berkmans' anti-bullying program uses puppets and other activities, like role playing, to connect with children.

Graded School District. Each partner school participates in a comprehensive program focused on four areas of social and emotional development: expressing feelings; caring and building community; resolving conflict; and celebrating diversity.

Through songs, creative writing, drawing, role play activities and more, kids learn how to treat others with respect, resolve problems when they arise and deal with strong emotions. They learn the difference between conflict – a normal part of life – and bullying, a recurring, intentional, aggressive act where there is a real or perceived difference in power. Above all, they develop skills to transform themselves from bystanders into upstanders, whether that's on the playground or on social media.

"All it takes is one child to intercede in a bullying situation and say 'we don't do this here' and pull the other child away," says Arlene. "When the kids speak, other kids listen."

Throughout the school year, one of the program's stars, a green puppet with purple hair, called Raf, and puppeteer Susan Vaseleniuck, an educator who has worked extensively with children and adolescents, visited classrooms and asked for help resolving problems the puppet experienced at school. The children wrote the puppet letters or drew pictures with advice and placed them in a special mailbox near the library. Students with the best answers received awards and recognition throughout the year.

"Respect Ability is by far the best program against (bullying)," says Long Creek Elementary School Assistant Principal Sony Anderson, "and the students really enjoy it."

The Berkmans, lifelong supporters of the performing arts, know that the creative aspects of the program are essential to connecting with kids and tapping into their empathy. "If you lecture to kids, they don't hear you," says Arlene Berkman. "But if you catch their interest, they say, 'oh!' -- they listen."

"It takes the arts to get them to engage," says Milt Berkman, who spent his career as an orthodontist specialized in treating children and adults with craniofacial anomalies.

In the current divisive political climate, the Berkmans say their work is more important than ever. Ultimately, helping kids realize the role they play in either putting others down or picking them up is at the heart of it all. ✨