

Taking a Closer Look at Heroes

TC alumna Kathleen Morin was working as a consultant to several not-for-profit organizations in 1990 when she was enlisted to help develop and launch a new classroom education program for **The Raoul Wallenberg Committee of the United States**. "The theme was 'heroes,'" says Morin. But who was Raoul Wallenberg? "I had no idea," she recalls. "I'd never heard of him."

That changed quickly enough. Wallenberg, she would learn, was a Swedish diplomat who, at great personal risk, leveraged his position to save the lives of thousands of Hungarian Jews during World War II. Arrested by the Soviet military after the war, he was never seen again. His fate remains a mystery.

Since its founding in 1981, **The Wallenberg Committee** has sought to perpetuate Wallenberg's humanitarian ideals through educational offerings, awards and other activities. (Its board of directors includes Beth Chadwick Kasser, herself a TC alumna and the daughter-in-law of Wallenberg's personal translator.) Perhaps nowhere has the Committee registered a more immediate or personal impact than through its multicultural, interdisciplinary K-12 program, "**A Study of Heroes: A Program that Inspires and Educates Through Heroic Example.**"

The program was conceptualized by committee chairperson Rachel Oestreicher Bernheim. "But Kathy Morin is its true genius," Bernheim is quick to note. "Its success owes everything to her vision, creativity and talent as an educator." It is Morin whom she credits for turning the concept into reality, co-producing an 1,800-page, 30-unit instructional resource that has been used in every state and three foreign countries. Prepared for three different reading levels and designed to integrate a broad array of subjects, the program to date has reached more than one million students.

The primary purpose of "**A Study of Heroes**" is to help students arrive at a true understanding of what a hero is-and isn't-and of the importance of heroic acts, especially as they relate to their own lives. "Children are prone to confuse the terms 'hero' and 'celebrity,'" says Morin. "When we were first getting started, we looked at polls conducted among students and saw that just about everyone named sports or entertainment figures as their heroes-and that virtually all were men. The only woman to be named with any frequency was Madonna." Adds Bernheim, "You had to be rich and famous to be a hero. Qualities like courage and compassion didn't figure in the equation."

Morin's collaboration with Bernheim was largely a matter of serendipity. Bernheim called TC in 1990 in search of an experienced curriculum development professional to assist in bringing "**A Study of Heroes**" to life. She wound up having a conversation with Professor Karen Zumwalt, for whom the story of Wallenberg's heroism seemed to strike a personal chord. Zumwalt



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immediately recommended Morin, a colleague and former student of hers. "She told me Kathy was exactly the person I was looking for," says Bernheim.

As a first step, Morin and Bernheim spent a year visiting New York City area schools- "everything from kindergartens to senior citizens centers," Morin says-recounting the story of Raoul Wallenberg and generating interest in their evolving new program. "The response was magical," says Morin. "Whether or not people had heard of Wallenberg, they became utterly engrossed in his story." Born into a prominent Christian family and educated at the University of Michigan, Wallenberg went to German-occupied Budapest in 1944 at the request of both the U.S. and Swedish governments. There he rescued as many as 100,000 persons marked for deportation to Nazi death camps by providing them with Swedish passports and refuge in "safe houses" under Swedish protection. In 1981 he became the sixth person ever to be named an honorary U.S. citizen. He remains one of six. "Rachel is the world's best story teller, but Wallenberg's story itself is inherently magical," says Morin. "It stays with you _forever."

In talking with students, Morin and Bernheim confirmed what the polls had shown-that children all too often viewed heroism and celebrityhood interchangeably. As the students began to recognize the difference, other misconceptions surfaced. "Many assumed you had to set out deliberately to become a hero," says Morin. "One of the things that most captures their imagination is the fact that Wallenberg was just an ordinary person who found himself in extraordinary circumstances and did what had to be done."

All told, Morin and Bernheim spent four years "camping out" in classrooms in New York City and North Carolina, fine-tuning their program, piloting it, and eliciting feedback from teachers and students, as well as from parents, administrators and others in the school community. "It's really the only way I've ever done curriculum development," Morin says.

At one faculty meeting, Morin asked if the program needed a usable definition of hero: "One teacher stopped me cold and said, 'Absolutely not.' She said it was important that the kids grapple with the concept on their own-not memorize someone else's construct." That notion has since become a core element in the program.

But that isn't to suggest that Morin and Bernheim haven't worked out their own definition. "We view a hero as someone who makes a positive difference, through non-violent means, in another's life," says Morin. Clearly, the 22 individuals studied in the program-among them, Eleanor Roosevelt, Rosa Parks, Mother Teresa, Arthur Ashe, Jacobo Timerman, Cesar Chavez, the Dalai Lama, Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King-meet that standard. "But one of the best results of the program is the transformation it achieves," says Morin. "Kids begin to move away from the idea that a hero has to be famous and start pointing to people in their own family or community."

The curriculum also encourages students to discover their own "inner hero" through self-assessments, classroom discussion, community service and intergenerational sharing. "They learn that it isn't necessary to risk one's life or go to extreme lengths to perform heroic acts," says Morin. At one of the North Carolina pilot schools, a family of students showed up in their pajamas one day because their house had burned down and they had no other clothes. "They

were picked on mercilessly, until one kid stepped forward and said, 'I don't think Raoul Wallenberg would like this,'" says Morin. "Amazingly, the bullying stopped. It was a compelling example of the power that hero stories have on people. You're never altogether sure what chord a story might be touching in a student-or when it will manifest itself. It may take five or 20 years, but these stories really stay with you."

A new unit now in development-"The Heroes of 9/11"-will focus on the police and firefighters who figured directly in the rescue and recovery efforts following last year's terrorist attacks, as well as on the legions of healthcare workers, volunteers and others who respond daily to emergency needs across the country. But the unit will emphasize that one needn't have spent time at Ground Zero to be considered heroic. "We know students who sold lemonade and raised hundreds of dollars to donate to their local firehouse," says Morin. "They're heroes too."

Just as no one sets out to be a hero, Morin never planned to be a teacher. After graduating from Hollins College in 1968 with a degree in mathematics and physics, she lined up a government job involved in pollution control when a hiring freeze put her out of work. Faced with a choice of two fall-back jobs-working nightshift at an airport, or teaching sixth grade in the Blue Ridge Mountains in Appalachia-she opted for the latter. She had never taught before.

Her sixth-grade charges ranged in age from nine to 18. Most lived in tiny wood frame houses, some without plumbing or heating, in hollows along the mountains' edge. "Some had never held a pencil or owned a book, yet they had a wisdom about so many things," she says. "For someone who had grown up in the New Jersey suburbs, it was a humbling experience. I realized how much I had to learn." After moving back to the New York City area, Morin decided she wanted to continue teaching and looked for jobs in predominantly non-white, low-income neighborhoods. "My reasons were selfish-I wanted to learn," she says. She spent three years teaching at Saint Cecilia's School in Spanish Harlem. "It was a challenging situation, but I had the chance to meet many wonderful people," she says. "And I learned something from everyone I met."

Morin holds a doctorate and a double master's degree from TC, as well as a third master's from Smith College. She was an instructor at TC from 1977-1983. Over the years she has served as consultant and program developer to scores of organizations including the South Bronx Human Development Organization, AARP, the New York Zoological Society, and the New York City Commission on the Status of Women. Her numerous publications include *House Sense*, a housing curriculum for the New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development, and a curriculum guide published by UNESCO and co-authored with TC professor Isobel Contento. In addition to working as director of education for **The Wallenberg Committee**, Morin serves as curriculum consultant to the Teachers Network, an international community of teachers and educators working together to improve student achievement through innovative instructional approaches, including Web-based curricular design.

Morin's creative approach informs every aspect of "**A Study of Heroes**." "We could have approached the subject of heroes in a way that is serious to the point of depressing," she says. "But of all the topics I've dealt with in curriculum development, this has been the most joyous,

because all the stories center around restoring hope. Stories about heroes are serious, but they're also uplifting and inspirational-and, ultimately, fun."