

ParentsCAN by Ev Parker

Monday, September 25, 2006

On the early evening of Sept. 9, my wife Jeanette and I were invited to attend the first annual celebration titled "Grand Traditions" in celebration of grandparents and hosted by ParentsCAN, a parent-child advocacy network in Napa County.

The event was held at the Trinchero family estate grounds at the Sutter Home ranch in St. Helena, where we learned that ParentsCAN exists to enable families of children with disabilities in Napa County to thrive and survive through education, training and support for parents and other family members, like grandparents of children who have learning, mental health and physical disabilities.

My thoughts went back to Jenny, our grandniece in Lynbrook, Long Island. I remembered attending her school's grandparents' open house and sitting next to her in her classroom as her proxy grandpa, as her real grandpa. Frank Burnett, Jeanette's brother, had died months before. I was so proud of Jenny, who was as smart as a whip. But not long after at the age of 12, Jenny on her bicycle was struck by a speeding car, and although she survived, any life as she lived it and loved it was over. Totally disabled for these last 13 years, organizations in New York much like ParentsCAN have provided services that afford her at least some semblance of life after that terrible accident.

As I scanned the booklet that arrived with the invitation to the ParentsCAN event, I realized how few Napers I really know despite my nearly nine years in this Shangri La.

But, the folks listed in the booklets that I did know are all solid citizens of Napa County, people like Bill Peatman, president of the board of directors of ParentsCAN, and board member Paul Hoffman, who I know through his wife Michelle, a fellow writer. Listed also were the Snowden brothers, Scott and Randy, Debbie Stallings of Lincoln Theatre, Greg Bennett of Seiberlich and Company, Jenny Sercu of Napa Valley College and Garry Lieberstein, the county's district attorney.

Before Peatman officially welcomed one and all, a couple approached me and introduced themselves as Jack and Donna Morgan, and I learned that Jack recognized me from the mug shot that runs with my column. Jack told me of his long career in the newspaper business. At one time he was publisher of the Register, so we had much in common.

Little did I know then that an hour later, Peatman would be honoring the Morgans, dedicated grandparents to nine children as this first year's "Extraordinary Grandparents" - a choice made easy by the votes of one community leader after another.

There was another nice surprise that evening, and it came in the person of Dr. Arthur Kornhaber. An authority on grandparenting, (a grandpa himself as well as a clinician, medical writer and author of seven books on children), Dr. Kornhaber gave an interesting talk on how, like when a switch is turned on, grandparents seem to light up the eyes of

their grandchildren.

Joan Lockhart, executive director of ParentsCAN, graciously offered to introduce us to Dr. Kornhaber after his interesting talk, but Jeanette and I had already spoken to the doctor before the talk and learned that he was from the Bronx. He'd laughed and shook our hands when we told him Jeanette was from Brooklyn and I was from Queens. "Three of the five boroughs of our old hometown are here tonight and that's just fine," he said.

We learned about ParentsCAN both in Peatman's welcoming talk and Joan Lockhart's kind words on a subject near and dear to her heart, children with disabilities.

They summed up the organization's purpose, which through experience and training, provides hope and guidance for families of children with disabilities regardless of the degree of severity.

The mission of ParentsCAN is to empower families of children with disabilities to become successful advocates for their needs, and the vision of the organization is to one day help all individuals with disabilities and their families to have access to services and support to reach their full potential.

Lockhart mentioned that there are more than 2,700 children in Napa County who are documented as disabled under the Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA.)

In ParentsCAN's first year, the organization has assisted almost 400 families through donations, and they are working hard to get the word out to families who need help.

Look around you on any street in Napa on any day and you might see a kid in a wheelchair, or walking on crutches, and you'll say a silent prayer of thanks that the kid in that wheelchair isn't your child. But, maybe we can do even better for the less fortunate. Four hundred families assisted is an admirable accomplishment, but in our heart of hearts, we know there's a long way to go.

You can begin doing the right thing by contacting ParentsCAN at 3299 Claremont Way, Suite 3, Napa, CA 94559 or by reaching their office by phone at 253-7444, by fax at 253-2244 or by visiting www.parentscan.org.

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