



Connecting with Today's Youth

A column by Circle Pines Mayor Dave Bartholomay for the Quad Community Press Newspaper (2/13/2018)

I was at my Lutheran church on Sunday when I observed something that sort of startled me. A young high school-age student, sitting nearby in the back row (a typical place for Lutherans!), had his ear buds in and was intently focused on his cell phone. It was getting all of his attention, when there would seem to be more important messages to hear and lessons to learn.

At first, I'll admit to being a bit concerned. A church would seem to be first and foremost a place to listen and to learn. These are places to build relationships and become part of a broader community. Instead, I saw a person engrossed in their own world, apparently unaware of their surroundings.

And then two thoughts struck me. First, I'm beginning to sound like an old man (yikes!). And second, I'm awful quick to judge without knowing anything about the young man or the situation. In a church, no less. Where judging others is exactly what you are taught not to do!

It seems like it has always been easy to complain about young people and their behaviors. Just like it was years ago when we played our rock n' roll too loud, or when our hair was too long. Today many researchers are concerned about the impact of always present technology on the development of our young people. So with all of this swirling around us, leading us into the viscous cycle of judging the next generation, what are we to do?

First, I would say parents and the 'older generation' need to model better behavior. We need to remember what it was like to be young, to be wondering about your place in the world, to be anxious about the changes that keep coming faster and faster into your life. And then we need to show kindness, express real interest in the young people all around us, and think hard about what we say and how we behave, because it is impacting young people looking for signs on how to successfully navigate through life.

Second, if it does indeed take a village to raise a child, we need to be a supportive community. We need to be the one to reach out to say hello, to introduce ourselves and express authentic interest in our young people and how they are doing. I worry that many of us walk right by young people like they are invisible, they are insignificant. I bet they can feel that, and I bet it hurts.

We often look at these problems as being large and overwhelming. How can any one of us really make a difference when technology has hooked our kids and many believe there is no hope? Well, the simple truth is that each one of us, in our day to day lives, can try to do a better job of communicating and caring about the youth in our community.

So please join me in hitting the 'reset' button. Let's start demonstrating that we really care about the young people in our homes and in our community. There is an old saying that 'listening is the best way to show respect'. Let's model good behavior, give them a smile, express real interest in the lives of our young people, listen to what they have to say, and provide encouragement.

Later on during that church service I looked back over at the young man and the ear buds were off, and the phone had been put away. The young man was paying attention. And I had learned a valuable lesson.