

## Foreword

What is good character? We know it when we see it.

At age 19, Bob Wieland landed a contract with the Pittsburgh Pirates but was drafted to serve in Vietnam. There he lost both of his legs in a mine explosion. In the hospital, he sank into a deep depression and wasted away to 87 pounds. Then one morning he woke up and said to himself, "What can I do? It won't help me to focus on what I can't do." He began to lift weights, then to lift competitively, and went on to set a world record by bench-pressing 500 pounds. He also learned to walk on his hands. On September 8, 1982, he left his California home and set out to walk across America on his hands. He got thousands of people to sponsor his trip, with the proceeds going to alleviate hunger in this country and around the world. It took him three years, eight months, and nearly 5 million hand steps to reach his destination of Washington, D. C. When he got there, he said: "I wanted to show that through faith in God and dedication, there's nothing a person can't achieve."

When Roxanne Black was 15, she was diagnosed with lupus—a serious, chronic inflammatory disease. She soon realized there were many people like her, suffering from unusual illnesses and feeling alone. So she formed the Friends' Health Connection ([www.friendshealthconnection.org](http://www.friendshealthconnection.org)), which she has since built into a national support network for thousands of people with serious illnesses, injuries, or disabilities. When Roxanne was in college, she suffered kidney failure and after receiving a kidney transplant from her sister, launched a campaign to encourage people to sign organ donor cards.

When Craig Keilburger was 12, he was shocked to read about the murder of a young Pakistani boy after he escaped from slavery as a child laborer. The Pakistani boy had been sold by his parents for \$12 to a carpet manufacturer and worked at a loom for 14 hours a day for no pay. Outraged, Craig started a youth organization in his home city of Toronto called Free the Children ([www.freethechildren.org](http://www.freethechildren.org)), dedicated to ending the exploitation of children. He went on a fact-finding trip through five Asian countries, attracting international media coverage. He presented his findings to UN's International Labor Organization. Free the Children has since involved hundreds of thousands of young people from 35 countries in supporting children's rights, schools, clean-water projects, health clinics, and economic cooperatives in 21 non-industrial nations. Last year my wife and I had the pleasure of hearing Craig Keilburger speak at Cornell University after his return from working with the rural poor in Africa.

What do these three stories teach us about character? That there are two kinds of virtues that make up good character: moral virtues and performance virtues. Moral virtues such as compassion and a sense of justice lead us to care about others and want to help them. But performance virtues such as confidence, determination, organization, and courage enable us to put our moral virtues into practice and make a positive difference in the world. Bob Wieland in his walk across America for world hunger, Roxanne Black in her outreach to the sick and disabled, and Craig Keilburger in his crusade for the rights of children all had this combination of moral and performance virtues. To be a person of character is to be the best person we can be—to work hard to develop our talents and resources and then use them in a spirit of service to benefit others.

The National Liberty Museum's *Heroes of Character* program knows the power of role models like these and therefore exposes young people to many persons who exemplify both moral and performance character—people such as Mother Theresa, Martin Luther King, Jr., Ben

Franklin, and Anne Frank. Mother Teresa had a sacrificial love for God's poor, but she also had an abundance of performance virtues such as grit, resourcefulness, and a steely determination. Martin Luther King had a passionate sense of justice but was also a brilliant strategist. As we work to develop character in our schools, families, and communities, we want to be sure to foster this crucial combination of ethics and excellence—doing good, and doing good *well*.

Like the *Heroes of Character* project, our Center for the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Rs ([www.cortland.edu/character](http://www.cortland.edu/character)) and partner organization, the Institute for Excellence & Ethics ([www.excellenceandethics.com](http://www.excellenceandethics.com)), have been the beneficiaries of the generous support of the John Templeton Foundation. In our current project to develop “smart and good schools,” we seek to develop, as does *Heroes of Character*, the three psychological dimensions of character: the head, the heart, and the hand. We want kids to know what's right, care about what's right, and do what's right. We want them to know what it means to give their best effort, care about doing their best, and develop the habits of doing their best in all areas of their lives.

Sometimes it works best to start with the head and work toward the heart and hand. But we do well to remember that it can also go in the other direction. A case in point: Billy was a 4<sup>th</sup>-grader who got in fights nearly every day at school and wouldn't do his class work. His father was in prison, his mother was an alcoholic, and Billy was already using alcohol himself. His teacher and the school counselor offered him a deal: He could be the special friend and protector of a 1<sup>st</sup>-grade boy in a wheel chair—helping him on and off the school bus, visiting his classroom in the morning and again in the afternoon to help him with his work, and being his protector on the playground—but on one condition: that he not fight in school. If he got in any kind of a fight, he lost the privilege of further contact with the 1<sup>st</sup>-grader that day.

Billy and the 1<sup>st</sup>-grade boy became close friends. Billy's fighting declined sharply. When the teacher told Billy one day that his little buddy was out sick, she saw a tear in his eye. Billy's schoolwork began slowly to improve. Why did this intervention work? Because it engaged and developed all three parts of Billy's character: the hand, because he had a new role to carry out; the heart, because he was in a relationship that taught him to care; and the head, because his new responsibility and relationship developed a concrete understanding of what it meant to behave in a responsible way. Billy's story is a testimony to the transformative power of service, which *Heroes of Character* strongly promotes.

The Museum's *Heroes of Character* program also wisely recognizes that character development is the shared responsibility of families, schools, communities, and young people themselves. Anne Frank, one of the program's exemplars, correctly observed, “The final forming of a person's character lies in their own hands.” The *Heroes of Character* interactive exhibits and website extension activities challenge kids to become the architects of their own character, constructing their character by the choices they make.

The evidence is all around us of what happens when we neglect the work of cultivating virtue. The *Heroes of Character* project reminds us that the most important measure of a society is not its economic wealth, its technological genius, or its military might. It is the character of its people.

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