

## 6-7-13 Volunteer for Public Health

Last Sunday I attended Plympton's birthday tea party where, in addition to the colorful sight and clinking sound of beautiful tea cups and the taste of delicious sandwiches and desserts, we heard stories about three people being honored as unsung heroes. As I listened to the reasons why these people were chosen, I thought of how they also, perhaps unknowingly, contributed to public health. The third recipient, Gail Briggs, was honored posthumously for her persistent and persuasive work for the preservation of open space, resulting in the achievement of what is known as Parks for Plympton. In all honesty, if Gail had been here to receive a phone call about this award, I think she would have said something along the lines of, "No, Please; it's not right. Many other people worked on those projects." The recognition was earned and deserved, though, as she did make such a difference. The ability to have public access allowing you to walk into more than eighty acres of rolling forested hills with old carriage trails and the highest point in town, offers so many health benefits. The pure pleasure derived from nature, fresh air and being surrounded by the beauty of trees and the quietness of it all is surely a treasure in a time when most of us need more exercise, too many people are spending too much time indoors, and children are growing up with video games as the ultimate form of entertainment. In fact, the Japanese have been studying "forest bathing", aka, shinrinyoku. Their studies indicate that it not only relieves stress; it improves the immune system. Yes, the ability to take a walk in the woods without having to ask permission is public health.

Polly Nordahl was honored for her decades of dedication to children, reading and teaching drama. She was described as being gifted with children and she told us how much she loved them. Her specialty, whether she was at a school or in a library was encouraging and guiding drama. How fortunate those children were! As parents and schools are busier and busier, it is difficult to find the time to talk, read books and to listen to children's ideas. Before we can listen, we have to elicit those ideas. That is difficult to do if everyone is pressed for time. In past generations, parents taught us to keep our nose to the grindstone. Now, it is not uncommon for the eyes and mind to be pressed to the iphone or ears pressed to the ipod. That can result in isolation and lack of communication skills. When children are allowed to read, talk about the story and then reenact those dramas, they learn the fundamental nature of what it means to be human. It is critical for children to have the opportunity to gain insight into emotions, including, or perhaps especially, the difficult ones: fear, loneliness, sadness or anger. Thank you, Polly, for giving children this important public health program where they became more sensitive and confident people.

Rita LaPointe was honored for her dedication to animals and her work with all kinds of animals, especially training dogs, is well known in the area. Her decades of working with 4-H gave her the opportunity to participate in a public health program, for there she trained children, as well as animals. She expected the young people to be on time, and prepared. She expected respectful behavior as well as language. Chewing gum wasn't allowed. They were to pay attention; not be popping bubbles. Even though this sounds like "Boot Camp for Kids", her classes have been popular for decades and still are. A young woman spoke about her "world being changed" as a result of working with Rita as a girl and thanked Rita for giving her confidence. She thanked Rita with tears in her eyes for impacting her life and so many others' lives, as she gave Rita a hug.

Treating children with respect and demanding respect of them is one way to create a generation capable of taking care of themselves, rather than expecting someone else to solve their problems and a generation willing to work hard, nose to the grindstone, focused on the task at hand.

Children thrive with guidance. They have the freedom to excel by moving on, past perceived problems, when they understand emotions. They need nature, as we all do.

These three women, honored for their separate achievements, could have also been awarded our appreciation for their public health programs and they give us hope for our town and our country. Thank you, Gail, Polly and Rita.

Please consider volunteering in your town. One person can make a difference and it sure is easier with helping hands.

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