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Middletown resident named head of nonprofit Connecting Generations



By Submitted photo
Middletown Crossing resident Richard Kapolka was recently named executive director for the board of Connecting Generations, a nonprofit group in Wilmington that provides programs based around mentoring, anti-bullying and helping adults through life transitions.

By Rebecca Henely
Middletown Transcript
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Middletown, Del. -

After finishing careers in education and then the nonprofit sector, Middletown resident Richard Kapolka enjoyed two years of retirement with his family. However, he has returned to work after being named executive director of the board of directors of Connecting Generations, a nonprofit agency centered in Wilmington.

"I don't think many people are leaving retirement excited to go back to work, but I am," Kapolka said.

Connecting Generations began in 1990 as Creative Grandparenting. Creator Robert Casey, a former DuPont employee, conceived it as a group of workshops aimed at helping grandparents provide wisdom and care for their grandchildren. Through the years, the group expanded to include all relationships in which a member of an older generation helps a member of a younger generation based on the elder's experience.

"The older generation really owes it to the younger generation to show them their knowledge, skills and caring," Kapolka said.

The group offers three programs aimed at establishing those relationships: Creative Mentoring, in which adults act as mentors for children for education and life needs, Seasons of Respect, a program for fifth graders aimed at stopping bullying, and Creative Transitions, which helps adults through life transitions, the primary ones covered being moving adults from work to retirement and from retirement to nursing home care.

Kapolka is a 57-year-old former Seaford resident who now lives in Middletown Crossing with his wife. He has two children. He said his career in education and the nonprofit sector have prepared him for the anti-bullying and especially the mentor programs.

Kapolka began his 28-year career as a math teacher before becoming a principal. Over his career, he headed three schools, first in the Seaford School District and then in the Christina School District. He said these positions have exposed him to the troubles of at-risk students.

"I've seen almost everything in my [nearly] 30 years as an educator," he said.

He said he has worked with thousands of kids who were bullied or did not feel respected in school and also worked with bullies to change their behavior.

"The whole focus is really how to treat others with respect for themselves and others," Kapolka said.

He said Seasons of Respect has been used in three Appoquinimink schools: Brick Mill Elementary, Cedar Lane Elementary and Olive B. Loss Elementary.

Yet Kapolka's great passion and experience is in mentoring. After he left the education field he worked as a staff member and executive for the Boys & Girls Club of Western Sussex for nine years and the executive director for two. He has also served on the boards of Junior Achievement and the Delaware Community Service Commission.

Kapolka said as a principal at Seaford High and Seaford Elementary, he always implemented a mentoring program. He also partnered with the Boys & Girls Club for after-school programs.

Connecting Generations has trained 6,500 mentors in its program, Kapolka said. The program took off when current senator and then-governor Tom Carper (D-Delaware) made mentoring one of his emphases while in office. Years later, Kapolka said the academic emphasis in the No Child Left Behind program and the recommended cuts for the Delaware Mentoring Council at the University of Delaware show less support for mentor programs.

"We believe we'll be able to overcome the challenges," Kapolka said.

He said a struggle in mentoring is that one-on-one time sometimes takes away from classroom time. To combat this, the organization will work with school systems to arrange after-school time with the students.

"I understand why teachers would have reservations with the students being pulled out of the subject they're having trouble with," Kapolka said.

He said what distinguishes a mentor from a tutor is a tutor is mostly an academic help, while a mentor is an emotional help. Mentors can help with academics, but also use it as an avenue to open a conversation with the mentee about other problems.

"I think when you're doing both you're at your most effective," Kapolka said.

Kapolka said his overall goals are to form partnerships between Connecting Generations and communities, schools and nonprofit organizations; re-energize the mentor program in the state and increase Connecting Generation's amount of mentors.

He said the ideal mentor should be non-judgmental and have time and the sincere desire to help a child.

For more information on Connecting Generations or how to become a mentor go to www.connecting-generations.org or call (302) 656-2122. The organization is located at 100 W. 10th St., Suite 1115 in Wilmington.

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