

# Guarding Values, From the Start

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Like many other people, I am disgusted with the ethical state of the world today, where dysfunction and dishonesty seem to be rewarded — in business, sports, politics, journalism, everywhere. But some young people aren't fazed at all, and that has me worried.

Vanessa Weber, 15, is concerned, though she does not seem surprised about scandals reported in the news lately.

"We're taught as children that obtaining capital and being a wealthy businessman is essential," said Vanessa, who is finishing her sophomore year at a Manhattan public school. "Being poor is synonymous with being unhappy."

A report released last fall by the Josephson Institute of Ethics in Los Angeles, based on a survey of 12,000 high school students, found that young people in general are less concerned about ethical behavior. The number of students who said they had stolen something rose to 38 percent in 2002 from 31 percent in a 1992 study. The number who said they had lied to their teachers and parents at least once rose to 93 percent from 83 percent.

And what about stretching the truth to get a good job? Thirty-seven percent said they would do so, up from 28 percent in 2000.

"The evidence is that a willingness to cheat has become the norm and that parents, teachers, coaches and even religious educators have not been able to set the tide," said Michael Josephson, president of the institute. "The scary thing is that so many kids are entering the work force to become corporate executives, politicians, airplane mechanics and nuclear inspectors with the dispositions and skills of cheaters and thieves."

But all is not gloomy. Some young people are trying to achieve some kind of ethical change in this country.

Gregg S. Behr, 30, is the founding director of the Content of Our Character Project, a national organization that promotes social consciousness among young people. The group started at the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University in August 1998 — just as the sex scandal involving President Clinton and Monica S. Lewinsky was breaking. Mr. Behr recruited 50 people in their 20's from across the country to help develop a vision for ethical leadership. The results were printed in a 32-page report, "The Content of Our Character: Voices of Generation X." Since April 1999, the group has held nearly 30 conferences nationwide focusing on ethical leadership.

"Part of our interest in starting this was to say that there are young people in the world who are resilient against the messages they are receiving," said Mr. Behr, now a managing director

of the William J. Copeland Fund, a nonprofit organization in Pittsburgh. "In 1998 we had a number of scandals. I don't know that it's better or worse now, but I do take a lot of comfort in knowing there are a lot of really good people out there. It's just that their stories aren't being told."

Nicole Kraus would agree with that assessment. Ms. Kraus, 31, is the chairwoman of the Philadelphia chapter of an ethical mentorship program that sprang from Content of Our Character. Since September 2002, a group of professionals has been meeting monthly to explore principles in business.

"So many young people from 22 to 30 were asking me advice about how to handle certain types of situations: 'How do I get promoted, get better raises?'" said Ms. Kraus, who is also the regional director of SEI Investments, a financial services firm in Oaks, Pa. "I thought we needed a forum to address these questions. I came out of Notre Dame thinking everyone's going to be good and truthful and do the right thing. I remember saying, 'They don't teach me about this; now what do I do?'"

She has found that young people are aching for positive role models, who, unfortunately, seem to be in short supply. But they are motivated to do their part. "People who come to the meetings, although disillusioned, want to make it better," she said of the mentoring program. "Some people want to make their cubes, their teams better. They're pretty passionate about it."

Maggie Super, 29, is the associate director of Groundwork Lawrence, a nonprofit environmental organization in Lawrence, Mass. Also a member of Content of Our Character, Ms. Super started the Boston Young Leaders forum in the spring of 1999 and has held several conferences on business ethics. "A lot of the issues we flagged in Content of Our Character were oddly prescient," she said. "In some ways the mainstream press and dialogue have come a lot closer to what we were talking about. The fact that it's become a public discussion is a positive sign."

Ms. Weber, the high school student from Manhattan, also believes that young people can change the world. "Not me, alone, but the whole of the world youth," she said. "We need to talk over how we want to grow up and raise our kids."

This is music to Mr. Behr's ears. "It's easy to be discouraged about life right now," he said. "But I get to work with great people, and that's why my glasses stay rose-colored."

My own glasses are not tinted yet. But with more enthusiastic people like Mr. Behr, perhaps one day they will be.

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