Living Ethically Through The Code of The West

Have you ever thought about what you are teaching the youth by your words and actions? When it comes down to it, do you practice what you preach?

I was talking to my sister, who lives in another state, about my niece and the school she attends. They asked each student to sell three discount cards for local businesses at $20 a piece. It was not mandatory and children were allowed to turn their cards in if they did not want to participate in the project. However, those who wanted to could sell more, and there were prizes for the top sellers. First prize was an electric scooter, which my niece really wanted. She got out and sold 48 cards.

The youth had to turn in their money and leftover cards on a certain date. The school was not happy with the number of cards sold, so they extended the deadline to allow youth to sell more cards. My niece was very upset since she had gone out and given it her all and saturated her neighborhood, and now others who didn’t work at it as hard have the opportunity to catch up and maybe surpass her.

Was this a fair and ethical solution for all involved? You make the call.

What are you telling a youth when you set guidelines like this and then don’t follow them? Yes, things change, I agree, but life is not always fair.

I’d like to look at ethics again through “The Code of the West.” This is a program that a teacher in Denver, Colo., developed from a book by James P. Owens. The teacher took his 10 principles on what to live by and taught them to her inner city kids. The kids were very apprehensive at first since they were not cowboys and wanted nothing to do with them. As the principles were taught and discussed, the kids’ attitudes changed and they started to quote the principles to others and changed their actions.
As each principle was presented in class, the students would discuss it and what it meant. I would like to share these principles with you and have you find a youth that you could discuss them with. I would also like to challenge you and that youth to set at least one new goal and incorporate it into your lives.

Ten principles to live by:

1. Live each day with courage.
2. Take pride in your work.
3. Always finish what you start.
4. Do what has to be done.
5. Be tough, but fair.
6. When you make a promise, keep it.
7. Ride for the brand.
8. Talk less and say more.
9. Remember that some things aren’t for sale.
10. Know where to draw the line.

When they had finished discussing all the principles, the students were challenged to come up with their own 11th principle. As I thought about it, I came up with my own: “Stuff happens. Your success or failure depends on how you deal with it.” Since learning about these principles I have come up with other 11th principles and thought about them, and I am sure I will have many more. So, what is your 11th principle?

I would like you to take my challenge and find a youth that you can mentor. As an adult or an older teen, you never know the impact you have on a younger youth’s life, so reach deep and help them understand these principles. There are so many different experiences out there and so many youth who are looking for that wonderful mentor they can look up to. Whether in 4-H or not, I would encourage you to stop and think of the positive youth experiences you can provide and help a child.

Also, I would ask you to stop and look at yourself next time a situation arises and ask yourself if you are doing the ethical thing.

To learn more about cowboy ethics, go to www.cowboyethics.org. Also, at www.cowboyethics.org/Classroom.php you will find the information and some video clips about the Denver teacher and her program.

To learn more about the 4-H program, contact Marla Lowder, UAF Cooperative Extension Service Tanana District 4-H and youth development agent, at 907-474-2427 or mklowder@alaska.edu. The Cooperative Extension Service is part of the University of Alaska Fairbanks, working in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture.