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Lady Of The Manners

By Lisa Fogarty

Proper dining etiquette dictates that soup should be sipped from the side of the spoon – never slurped. When excusing oneself from the table, napkins should be left on the chair and, when serving, food should be passed to the right.

Just try explaining those rules to a teenager who considers the removal of one ear phone from his iPod the ultimate familial sacrifice.

“It’s important to teach children good etiquette from a very early age because it will help them in life,” said Stephanie Hunt, founder and director of Swan Noir, a New York City finishing school for children ages 6-18. “Etiquette is about making other people feel comfortable.”

Times may have changed, but Hunt, 34, doesn’t think that’s a viable excuse for letting good manners go the way of Medici China. The Queens native, who credits her mother for instilling her with good manners, also owes a lot to early training. As a gawky and thin 12-year-old, she attended charm school and learned the proper way to sit, walk, and gracefully carry a conversation.

“It gave me confidence,” she said. “Now that I’m older, I see these young girls and I say, ‘wow, that was me.’ I wanted to find a way to give back, not only to my community, but to children, in general.”

After earning her etiquette certification at the International School of Protocol in Baltimore, Md. and attending finishing school in London, Hunt began conducting etiquette workshops for children and teenagers. She offers many lessons, among them, basic table manners, grooming, telephone etiquette, listening skills, job interview training, and even a class called “The Perfect Gentleman,” where she reinforces decorum such as holding doors, pulling out chairs, and much more.

“I tell young girls, you need to know what it feels like to have a chair pulled out for you,” Hunt said. “You have to give a young man the chance to do it – sometimes they surprise you.”

Hunt is so passionate about good manners that she has extended her knowledge to help young adults from low-income households. **This fall she teamed up with two Bronx institutions: PS/MS 218 and the Women’s Housing and Economic Development Corporation (WHEDCO), a community-based group that works with families struggling to cope with the challenges presented by poverty. Her mission is to teach children important social skills that they may not be taught at home. Her top etiquette “musts” include eye contact, which she said is critical in making other people feel comfortable in a conversation, using the words “please, thank you, and I’m sorry,” sending a written thank-you note, which she refers to as an “art,” and cleaning up after oneself. In addition, children are constantly being bombarded by technology these days and lack strong conversational skills, she said. It’s crucial for parents to reinforce these skills.**

“Don’t just accept ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answers from a child,” she said. “You have to keep digging in a conversation. Once you get them to open up, they don’t stop.”



Stephanie Hunt

Hunt's quest for global good form is paying off. Her program involves taking students to museums, on college tours, and out to formal restaurants, and adds to a child's enrichment, said Davon Russell, the vice president of programs at WHEDCo. Russell is even willing to endure the occasional admonition for Hunt's sake.

"At an event this morning, I placed a name tag on a student's left side," Russell said. "He corrected me and told me the right etiquette is to place a tag on someone's right side because that's how people are used to reading names. I said, 'you must have learned that from Stephanie.'"