



## A risk worth taking

Staff photo by Leigh Auerbach  
Dr. Lori Salierno, left, Founder and CEO, Shawn Naidu, Country Administrator and Jose Maldonado, Chief Operating Officer, all of Teach One to Lead One, a program of Celebrate Life International that deals with boosting kids self-esteem, talk about the program.

### Celebrate Life International gains worldwide attention for work with troubled youth

By Ashley Hungerford  
Marietta Daily Journal Staff Writer

**ACWORTH** — Over 10 years ago, Celebrate Life International Founder and CEO Lori Salierno was speaking on wise choices at an inner city school when a student gave her the middle finger while others yelled at her from the balcony.

"I was taken back by their anger, and how much hostility was there when they didn't even know who I was," she said. "So I left that assembly with a real sense of a call to go do something much more significant than just going and speaking in assembly."

She left the school and recruited José Maldonado, asking him to quit his job at Hewlett-Packard. They started the non-profit group Celebrate Life International unsure of what the work would be, but "knowing it would lead to significant change."

"What turned out to be one of my worst speaking events, turned out to be a very pivotal point in my career and life," Dr. Salierno said.

By building character based on practical leadership skills and universal principles, she says Celebrate Life International works with "at risk students."

"We exist to transform at risk students into responsible citizens," she said.

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— Lori Salierno,

Founder and CEO of Celebrate Life International

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Celebrate Life International's pilot program, Teach One to Lead One is a program based on three principles: teaching universal principles like respect and integrity to at risk students across the country; doing it in a caring positive, mentorship relationship; and doing it all in the spirit of adventure.

And recently Teach One to Lead One has gained international attention from South Africa wanting to implement Teach One to Lead One in their schools.

But Dr. Salierno is adamant that South Africans be the ones to implement the programs.

"Basically what we heard from the people in South Africa is 'we want this to be a South African solution for South African problems,'" she said. "It's not the rich Americans coming over to help the poor South Africans. Can you enable us and empower us to put this into our

schools?' I was disenchanted with Americans coming over and kind of throwing a solution. What if you empower people to be the solution themselves?"

Shawn Naidu is the person to spearhead the project in Cape Town, South Africa. And for the next four weeks he is being trained at Celebrate Life International's office in Acworth to take the program back to his country. He is working closely with Maldonado to learn the Teach One to Lead One program.

It has been 15 years since South Africa got out of apartheid, and Dr. Salierno said the students there need to have strong leadership skills and moral character to continue to move South Africa forward.

Naidu, the country administrator for South Africa, said when he saw the ad for the job in the newspaper to work with Celebrate Life, he said it was as if the ad was written for him just without his name.

"I am now sitting thousands and thousands of kilometers from home," he said. "This is not a job, but it's a calling and a ministry. To be successful in this thing, I think we need to realize it's about enriching the lives of young people."

Naidu and Dr. Salierno agree that many of

See Risk, Page 3B

Please turn over

## Risk

Continued from Page 1B

the problems and destructive behaviors students face in South Africa are the same one students face here like drugs, alcohol, violence and living without parents.

"That is what makes the solution so applicable for us in South Africa," Naidu said. "It worked here and we want to make it work in South Africa. We love our country and it's a great country, but it has got its issues. And we don't want to overlook those issues."

And Dr. Salierno said the people of South Africa asked instead of "reinventing the wheel" and coming up with a new program, can they just share and learn from Celebrate Life, and make the program work for their schools.

Naidu said they want to join forces with the America teams to make the program successful in his country.

"As much as it might be an

American concept, we want to make it proudly South African," he said. "We're looking for a hand up, not a hand out. We're a country that has immense potential"

Maldonado said they are putting the universal principles they teach in America to the test by implementing the program in South Africa, but he said he knows they "will fly" over in South Africa.

He said they will use South African examples of people that made a difference in the country like Nelson Mandela.

"The power of Teach One to Lead One resides in the people that implement the program," he said. "That is why it's so critical that it be South Africans that will deliver the program."

Dr. Salierno said South Africa has two extreme areas of first world development, but down the road are townships with thousands of people basically living in shacks, and the AIDS percentage is extremely high.

A problem all three said they want to combat in South Africa is

ignorance. Dr. Salierno said one myth is that if you have sexual relations with a virgin you will be cured.

"Knowledge is power so they say," Naidu said. "My country over the last few years has been on an educational drive about AIDS. The solution resides in education. One of the greatest diseases people have is ignorance because what they don't know really will kill them. What we want to do is destroy the ignorance."

The pilot program in South Africa will start July 27 at Muizenberg High School in Cape Town, South Africa with two 10th grade classes with a 10th grade control group. Naidu said the principal at the high school has given them his full-support of implementing Teach One to Lead One in the school.

Though thousands of miles will separate Naidu and his American counterparts, Naidu said he will never feel alone because of the support he is receiving.

Naidu said just as Mandela and his supporters stood up and did away apartheid, they will work to educate the students and fight the

enemies of drugs, violence, ignorance and many others.

"We can fight it and we are fighting it," Naidu said. "We will overcome."

ahungerford@mdjonline.com



Staff photo by Leigh Auerbach

From left, Shawn Naidu, Country Administrator, Jose Maldonado, Chief Operating Officer, and Dr. Lori Salierno, Founder and CEO, all of Teach One to Lead One, talk about the program in their Acworth office.

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