

Catalyst for caring

BY SHELLI T. SIVERT

Quite literally, it's something as simple as the golden rule that keeps Carla Kelley going each day. This remarkable Wasatch Woman has made it her life's work to teach members of our community to "treat others as you want to be treated." Too often, this simple principle seems to be a lost virtue. But as long as Carla Kelley, the executive director and founder of the Human Rights Education Center of Utah, can do something to keep the essence of kindness, empathy and humanity alive, she will do it.

Carla has worked tirelessly to build the Human Rights Education Center (HREC) in Salt Lake City from the ground up. "I started this nonprofit like most people start a bridge club," Carla says with a smile. "I asked all my friends to be board members." Then she affectionately recalls how the required \$500 nonprofit license fee was raised. Her three adult children, unbeknownst to her, had written to everyone in their reach asking them to give a little something to the cause. The response was overwhelming. "So this is the way it started — by people coming together and caring," Carla says. "I'll never forget it."

Although the HREC opened officially in 1999, Carla's journey began long before that. "I'm the mother of a gay son and he's 40 years old ... My son is still not safe." Carla knew early on that her son's life would not be easy, so she educated herself in order to help him. "What I realized is the ignorance was astounding."



Strengthening her desire to help humankind, Carla received a B.A. in Integral Studies from the California Institute of Integral Learning, which takes a dialogue-based approach to learning about how human beings connect. Carla has also served as a diversity trainer for both AmeriCorps and the Anti-Defamation League. "I truly believe that as human beings we are all here to serve one another — to help us to be the highest and best that we can be."


In addition, three national events within a year of each other deeply affected Carla and propelled her into action: the murders of James Byrd Jr. in Texas and Matthew Shepard in Wyoming, and the Columbine High School tragedy. "I couldn't stand it," Carla says. "Kids going out and killing other people? It's not okay. That's when I said, 'I'm going to do this.'"

Education is what the HREC is all about. "Prejudice is learned behavior," Carla says. "But learned behavior can be un-learned." The

HREC "provides anti-bias, anti-bullying and diversity education for people of all ages and backgrounds." Carla teaches values education courses, presents to schools across the state and manages the center's operations. Carla gives everything she has to this organization because of her belief that "education is our only hope." Through Carla's efforts, more than 30,000 youth have received training.

"This work is not about right and wrong ... It's about us coming together as a community," Carla says. "It's not where we're different that's important; it's where we're the same. That's where we recognize ourselves. That's where we can communicate. That's where we cross those divides."

Carla considers her greatest accomplishments to be both the raising of her three children and her ability to love. "I was just blessed with children who have given me far more than I have given them." She continues, "Love and acceptance is why HREC was born ... Our human family, especially our children, need to be taught that kindness and love are the essence of our common humanity."

All this, and Carla has not yet reached the summit of her dreams. She hopes to one day build a Human Rights Community Center, where the principles of humanity will be shared in a variety of forms. "I see art; I see plays; I see music; I see celebrations." But for this to happen, she needs others to support this dream. 

Find out more about the Human Rights Education Center, learn how to request a presentation at your school or to make a donation, please visit www.hrecutah.org.