



Stuart Harris Photo/Bron Duncan

B

British-born but a Roanoker by choice for nearly 30 years, Stuart Harris has always had a penchant for trying to improve the lot of others. Now, spurred on by the character education legislation passed in the General Assembly three years ago (and sponsored by Senator John Edwards) the former mass merchandising executive is enlisting the help of corporate executives, small business owners, teachers and just plain folks in attempting to build the Greater Roanoke Valley Character Coalition (GRVCC), a broad-based effort that seeks to make the region a better place to live.

The GRVCC's message and mission follows up where the state legislation left off. That mandate decrees that issues dealing with character must be taught in the Commonwealth's public schools. How that is accomplished is left up to individual localities at this point. Harris is trying to supplement what the schools are teaching while introducing the group's "Six Pillars of Character:" Trustworthiness, Respect, Responsibility, Fairness, Caring and Citizenship into the arts and culture, business, health, sports, faith based, media, and legal communities, among others. True to his CEO background, Harris oversees meet-

ings but calls on others in Roanoke to chair subcommittees, often asking them to donate paper, printed materials, and other goods used to help spread the word. He has also been supported with decrees from local governments, pledging to stand behind the character initiative.

Harris says several key events helped shape his attitude, including a charity for children he operated for ten years in England. A notion about that experience stayed with him: "we did a lot of good for kids in many ways, but at the end of the day they went home to parents [that might] be pounding on



Stuart Harris during a recent television interview Photo/Bron Duncan

each other or were drunk, or didn't care. It just burned in my head that good parenting was just so important." That's a central theme for the Greater Roanoke Valley Character Coalition — teach those six pillars in school; but also at home, on the job site, the playing field, in the office, at church, so that everyone on all age levels get the message. With plenty of examples of poor character evident on the streets, ball fields and in the boardrooms — just check any newspaper on a given day — there seems to be no shortage of people who should study the Six Pillars.

From his wife (who had a doctorate in family and child development from Virginia Tech) Harris heard horror stories of adults who had problems stemming from an abusive childhood. "It was a combination of that and everything else that sort of hit me about ten years ago. We can't change parents. We try; Prevent Child Abuse tries, the courts try, everybody tries. The reality is [many] parents don't want to be changed." Harris says preparing the next generation on issues of character may be the best bet. He notes that most young parents learn on the job while raising children, still trying to identify their own character while attempting to instill it in others. A father of three adult children himself (Harris declines to reveal his age in print but looks a decade or so younger than what's written on his birth certificate) he regrets leaving so much of the parenting chores to his wife Paula "while I was off being this busy executive."

The other major turning point in his life: Harris spent five years caring for cancer-stricken Paula before she passed away, neglecting his own health in the process. "That was a time for me to ask, 'what do I want to be when I grow up?' I took a few months to get myself together." Looking back he decided that one of the best parts of his life occurred when he ran the charity in England. "It became clear to me that I feel best if I'm doing something for someone else. So for the last three years (since Paula's death) I've been completely committed to seeing what sort of contribution I could make."

His involvement with the GRVCC started through a connection to the United Way; Harris soon realized that the local community as a whole had to support character education for it to work. In other words: in order to be effective it couldn't just be a school project that was quickly forgotten. Character had to start at home and in the churches before spreading to the schools and workplaces. Harris traveled to other parts of the country (on his own dime) to see how other localities were handling the subject.

He moved forward by holding a public forum shortly after the September 11th tragedy and started forming subcommittees early in 2002. "I was surprised by the fact that I got very few refusals [when recruiting coalition members]," exclaims Harris, who feels he "has a tiger by the tale. My challenge is to maintain the momentum. We have so much enthusiasm and talent involved." Local

heavyweights like Advance Auto, Grand Furniture, Kroger, and American Electric Power are pitching in. "We're pulling together all the talent, energy and enthusiasm of so many sectors of the community," exclaims Harris, "to achieve one objective — to help our kids grow into a better life."

How will Harris know when the GRVCC has been effective? "A very important question. There are a lot of statistics to be collected. We can measure behavior in schools, crime [rates]. We think we'll see an improvement in academic performance." Those who meet Stuart Harris have no doubt that he intends to stay on the job until that improvement can be measured.

Go to www.valleycharacter.org for more information on the Greater Roanoke Valley Character Coalition.

- If you know someone interesting that deserves a mention, let us know. We want to feature the true people of Southwest Virginia that may otherwise be overlooked. Gene Marrano can be reached in care of City Magazine by calling (540) 345-6300 or emailing citymagazinemail@aol.com