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OPINION

Yarbrough: It doesn't take much to make the world a better place

By **DICK YARBROUGH** published Monday, March 2, 2015

Will this be a better world because you and I spent some time here? Can we really make a difference?

I thought about that after a note I received from Jan Goddard of Snellville. She wanted me to know about a “special guy” named Mike Goddard, who also happens to be her husband.

Jan said, “I read your column regularly and know that you take a special interest in people who treat others kindly. My husband, Mike Goddard is retiring March 1 after working in his current job for 34 years. His customers are writing heartfelt notes to him, giving him retirement gifts and are even going to recognize him at their next Homeowners Association.

“During the time in his job, he has called emergency vehicles for people with a medical emergency, checked on people he has not seen for a while, and notified police of a possible scam operation. You may wonder if Mike is a clergyman, a doctor, or a teacher. No, he is a mailman. I’m biased, but I think Mike is the best mailman in the country and so do his customers.”

Her evidence is compelling.

The day I got Ms. Goddard’s note I had been discussing this subject with Willie Bolton, the recently retired warden of the Athens-Clarke County Correctional Institute and a colleague of mine on the board of the Department of Juvenile Justice. We were talking about what one person can do to make a difference in the lives of others. I have no doubt Willie Bolton has made the difference in a lot of lives over his 40-year career.

He said, “When I walk through a cemetery and look at a headstone, I wonder what went on in their lives in that 12 inches of space between the date of their birth and the day they died.”

What, indeed? Did they encourage someone to realize their potential? Were they the sort of people that others wanted to emulate? Did you feel inspired when you were around them? Were they kind and caring? Or did they just take up time and space and the world was no better for their having been here?

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Whatever I have accomplished in my career has been because of a lot of good and wise people who were there at critical junctures in my life and who made a lasting impression on me. One is Dr. Raymond Cook, my English literature professor at Georgia State. In what can only be described as a miracle, Dr. Cook's method of teaching and his insistence that we remember what he taught us inspired me not to drop out of college and to get my degree. The rest, as they say, is history.

Today, Dr. Cook is 94 years young, living in Valdosta and still possessed of a remarkable mix of wit and wisdom. We communicate regularly and I learn something new from him every time we do. I wonder what would have happened to me had our paths had not crossed those many years ago.

I'm sure you can name those that have made a positive difference in your life. If so, I hope they are still around so that you can tell them in case you haven't already. It took me 47 years to let Dr. Cook know about the impact he had on my life. Shame on me.

What would be even better is to have someone tell you that you made a difference in their life. Maybe it was a kind word or a good deed or the fact that you helped them when no one else would.

You don't have to discover a cure for cancer to make a difference in this world, although that would be nice. You don't have to single-handedly bring peace on earth, although that would be nice, too. All you have to do is make the world better for one person — or more, if you are so inclined — by how you live your life.

What Sue Goddard is telling me is that her husband has done just that. One person who spent 34 years delivering mail but, more importantly, touching people's lives in the process. She has reminded me I can do more than I have done to leave this world better than I found it. You can, too. After all, it only takes one.

Georgia columnist Dick Yarbrough can be reached at yarb2400@bellsouth.net or at P.O. Box 725373, Atlanta, GA 31139. His website is dickyarbrough.com, and he is on Facebook at www.facebook.com/dickyarb.

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