

Selma Bukstein | **EVERYDAY HEROES**

True hero worship

Teaching tolerance, Selma Bukstein's unique doll program explores the annals of history to get through to children.

"Hello, boys and girls! I'm a doll lady." Selma Bukstein's New Jersey voice brings the fifth-grade class at Newdale Elementary School to attention like a smack upside the head. She might be 87 years old, but this woman shows no evidence of advanced age - except maybe for the gray hair and those orthopedic shoes.



SAMANTHA DUNN
REGISTER
WRITER

"What's a hero?" She shoots the question at them as she snaps open the clasps on a worn, black valise. From its faded felt interior she pulls detailed, handmade portrait dolls of Abraham Lincoln, George Washington Carver, Helen Keller and more, a half-dozen in all, that she lines up in front of the class.

Hands strain upward to answer. "Spider-Man!" says one boy in the front row. "Superman!" says another.

Bukstein sends them the kind of look she probably gave her own five boys a million times as they were growing up. "Think harder," she says with a half smile.

"Someone you want to be like?" a girl asks.

"Someone you want to be like," Bukstein turns the girl's question into a statement. "That's right."

For 56 years, Bukstein has volunteered to present this program, called "Dolls for Democracy," to elementary schoolchildren from Missouri to Alabama to Mississippi - places where her husband, Paul Bukstein, owned and ran factories - to this classroom in Huntington Beach, not far from where the couple made their retirement home in Laguna Woods.

For a few years, no one here seemed interested in the dolls. Schools did not call her back. Maybe they thought it was too old-fashioned in this digital age. The dolls remained in their case. But Bukstein kept calling. She sent DVDs of her presentation to superintendents. She talked to teachers. And then, last year, she talked to this newspaper, which ran an article about the plight of Dolls for Democracy. And - as they say in Jersey - whaddya know? The phone started to ring again.

Bukstein was carting these same dolls (bought for \$11) into schools in the South when they were still segregated. "I went to an all-black school once and I was mad because those kids did not know about George Washington Carver. I said, 'What are they teaching them?'" Indignation makes her voice rise at the memory.

The organization Jewish Women International, then known as B'nai B'rith, began "Dolls for Democracy" in conjunction with an interfaith, interracial program called Fellowship House. The program was a way to teach children tolerance of others, and to inspire them to overcome obstacles and disadvantages through telling them



Selma Bukstein, 87, speaks to fifth-graders about racism and tolerance using dolls of six historical figures: Abraham Lincoln, George Washington Carver, Helen Keller, Albert Einstein, Juliette Low and Mother Cabrini.

SELMA BUKSTEIN

Residence: Laguna Woods
Age: 87
Favorite Charity: Anti-Defamation League

HOW YOU CAN HELP

Contact via the Web at www.adl.org or through their regional office, 320 N. Broadway, Santa Ana, CA 92701, or call 714-953-2860.

stories about the lives of historical figures who changed the world for good. It grew into a national program, but today few volunteers remain, according to Jewish Women International.

For all of those years, Bukstein has happily paid for gas to drive wherever she's wanted, created lesson plans around the dolls to offer teachers, called administrators to pitch the program - done pretty much anything to talk to children about racial equality, social justice, religious tolerance and understanding of people with disabilities.

"She loves doing it," says her husband. He recalls one time when, during her talk on Helen Keller, she was showing the children the alphabet in Braille and a boy with disabilities was able to read it for his class. "He was so proud to have the opportunity to show his classmates what he could do and have them understand. And she was proud to give him that opportunity."

"One of my sons just told me, 'Mom, you've always taught us, 'Stand up for what's right,'" Bukstein says with a chuckle.

It's a way of being she inherited from her own "dynamic mother," she says. Widowed at age 38 with five children to raise, Buks-



Fifth-grader Kayla Vu raises her hand in response to one of Bukstein's questions during her "Dolls for Democracy" presentation.

tein's mother ran a roofing and sheet metal contracting business in the days before many women did such things. "The union in New Jersey was very strong, but the men respected her," Bukstein says. "Maybe that's where I got it."

She's used that intrepid nature wherever she has traveled. When she heard that two little farm boys outside of Chaffee, Mo., died in a shallow pond because they couldn't swim, she became a lifeguard, certified by the Red Cross, and singlehandedly launched a swimming program in the early '60s, teaching, says her husband Paul, "thousands of kids" to swim in a program that charged 25 cents for the whole summer of lessons. She tried to get sex education into Southern schools in the late '50s - that was a no-go, but at least she tried.

"I was told, 'Forget it, they can't handle it.' And they couldn't. In those days, you couldn't talk about anything - the language wasn't even there," she says.

Working with a Methodist church, she brought kindergarten to children in Missouri in a time before they had it, and - "with a cadre of women behind me" - launched the Cape Girar-

deau (Mo.) Historical Society, in the hometown of Rush Limbaugh (who she calls "Rusty," since he was a friend to her sons).

"One of our friends said, 'Look, it took a little Jewish girl from New Jersey to start all this!'" she recalls with a hearty laugh.

And yet, she thinks the work the dolls can do is not done, especially in light of the problem of bullying in schools. The attentive faces in the Newdale fifth-grade class - as she talks about Lincoln growing up poor in a log cabin, and Cesar Chavez fighting for Mexican immigrant workers - indicate that history told the old-fashioned way can still enthrall.

"I try not to be pabulum, I try to say, 'C'mon, whaddya think?' I want those kids to know, even if they are small, to think for yourself about that person who has different skin, goes to a different church, wears different clothes, comes from a different country." Bukstein's blue eyes flash as she talks.

For all her knowledge, Bukstein doesn't have the word "retired" in her vocabulary. "Old activists," she says, "never retire."

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“ She was really good at grabbing their attention with quick stories, and the kids enjoyed the visuals. It's a good message. Very worthwhile. **”**

JIM TILKA
FIFTH-GRADE
TEACHER

I look at her today

“ and I know what captivated me 65 years ago. She is just interested in everything and anything that is good for people, that can make this world a better place. **”**

PAUL BUKSTEIN
HUSBAND



Selma Bukstein has been using the same six dolls in her presentations for 56 years.

ABOUT THIS FEATURE

The Register honors local people whose everyday acts of bravery uplift and strengthen our community. Each week, we will profile a living local hero, with one extraordinary person selected as Hero of the Month and awarded a stay at the Montage Laguna Beach, one of Orange County's premier resorts and an advertising sponsor of this page. To nominate, go to ocregister.com/heroes or email sdunn@ocregister.com with "Heroes" in the subject line. Include a description of why you find the person inspiring, your name and your telephone number.