

Celebrating the Pleasures of Today's Sophisticated Family Lifestyle

Chester County **LIFE**

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Faces Changing CHESTER COUNTY

It Takes a Village

By Connie Nye Shapiro

Photography by Kelly O'Keefe



Connie Nye Shapiro, Author

The African proverb “It takes a village to raise a child” provides the inspiration for a simple children’s picture book written by Peace Corps volunteer Jane Cowen-Fletcher. Based on her observations while serving in Benin, West Africa, *It Takes a Village* is the story of Yemi, a young girl, proudly assuming the responsibility of watching her toddler brother at an African marketplace while her mother minds the stall. A momentary lapse in Yemi’s attention, however, leads to her brother’s disappearance. As she searches for him throughout the marketplace, Yemi discovers that many of the villagers have contributed to keep him safe from hunger, thirst, fright and fatigue.

Campaigning for her husband a decade ago, Hillary Rodham Clinton popularized that same African proverb to underscore the need for communities to join together in supporting families in our modern and somewhat perplexing “villages.” Her book *It Takes a Village and Other Lessons Children Teach Us* defines our culture as clearly more disconnected from extended family and care-taking friends than the traditional African village. Yet the needs of families, to be safe from hunger, thirst, fright and fatigue, remain the same.

Clinton defines today’s village as a “network of values and relationships that support and affect our lives.” Both literally and metaphorically, the concept of the village is being revitalized right here in Chester County. People like Laura Munts of Mommy’s Light Lives On Fund, Bob Hankin of The Hankin Group and Heidi McPherson of Chester County Fund for Women and Girls are among the faces providing those networks and changing Chester County for the better.

It Takes a Village... to Help Children Grieve

Laura Kramedas Munts, Executive Director, Mommy’s Light Lives On Fund

“There is no influence so powerful as that of the mother.”

—Sarah Josepha Hale

Every year, Chelsea Rose takes a trip to the beach and gets to bounce on her hotel bed. Jakia goes to the mall for back-to-school shopping. Max and Madi plant flowers. Simple acts, yes. But they are traditions that have powerful influences on the lives of these children whose mothers have died from brain cancer, heart disease or breast cancer.

Twenty thousand children under the age of 18 in the Delaware Valley suffer such losses. From AIDS to accidents to various forms of cancer, mothers are dying and leaving behind children and families, some already fatherless, overwhelmed with grief. According to Mommy's Light Lives On Fund, each one of these children is "three times more likely than the general population to gravitate to either end of the social spectrum" as either a juvenile delinquent or a significant community contributor. To tip the scales in favor of a positive outcome, says Executive Director and Board President, Laura Munts, a healthy grieving process is essential.

Mommy's Light Lives On Fund is an organization created to help children, ages 3 to 18, cope with the death of a mother by celebrating her life with a tradition established while she was living. Usually the major caretakers in the family, mothers provide security, routine and predictability. When a mother dies, families struggle with so much that oftentimes the children's need to maintain a bond with their mothers is overlooked. The job of Mommy's Light is to help children keep that bond intact through the process of identifying and carrying out annual traditions. From baking cookies at Christmastime to cheering at NASCAR races, children are supported in a positive manner by commemorating their mothers' lives through these simple activities.

Since their first child started planting flowers in the spring of 2000, Mommy's Light has grown enormously with Laura Munts leading the way. A retired attorney staying at home with her children, Laura wasn't looking for a new career. But her close friend Mary Murphy changed everything. In 1997, Mary, realizing she was



dying of a rare form of cervical cancer, became determined to establish an organization that would help maternally bereaved children celebrate their mothers' lives. Before passing away just a few months later and leaving her 10-year-old son motherless, Mary solicited Laura's help incorporating Mommy's Light Lives On and promising to carry out her vision.

The first few years were a struggle, admits Laura, as the original board of directors grappled with how to turn the mission into tangible application. With degrees in law and applied psychology, Laura was equipped for, though overwhelmed by, the challenge. Continually inspired by Mary's presence, even after her death, and with great support from her husband and

Laura Kramedas Munts, Executive Director of Mommy's Light Lives on Fund

children, Laura persevered. With organizational guidance from the Make-A-Wish Foundation, an initial board of directors committed to Mary Murphy, numerous guidance counselors and some early successful fundraising, Mommy's Light got underway and there's been no looking back. Max, the organization's first child served, has been participating in a flower-planting tradition provided by Mommy's Light for six years and is now joined by his younger sister, Madi, as well as their stepfamily. Along with Max and Madi, Chelsea Rose and Jakia, 97 other children are now celebrating the lives of

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Bob Hankin, President & CEO of
The Hankin Group

their deceased mothers annually with the help of Mommy's Light.

As a public charity that provides services free-of-charge, Mommy's Light is funded strictly by donations and fundraisers. Annual events such as golf tournaments, 5-K runs and dinner auctions are orchestrated to help cover the average cost of \$350 per child to facilitate the traditions. Though the cost is small, the impact is immeasurable and gaining recognition. Edie Huggins of NBC 10 News honored Laura Munts as a "Huggins' Hero" in 2004. And Maybelline recently honored Laura as

one of four recipients of its "You Make a Difference" contest advertised in People magazine. Presented with a \$10,000 award, Mommy's Light staff and volunteers were also treated to a benefit concert featuring Delta Goodrem, a 21-year-old Australian singer and cancer survivor.

Despite the growing success of the organization, Laura acknowledges the difficulties of dealing with families of dying mothers. As hard as the circumstances are, Laura maintains that it is also a privilege to work with these courageous families and to walk such "sacred ground." Mommy's Light has created a sense of community for Laura and her staff as well, shaped by the many families and volunteers that bring

the program to life. Though Mommy's Light now serves 101 children, Laura reflects on the 19,900 other Delaware Valley children coming to terms with their mothers' deaths without the help of an organization like Mommy's Light. With continued growth, Laura hopes to be able to provide a network of caring, responsive people to help all maternally bereaved children honor and stay connected to their mothers through treasured traditions.

For more information on programs, bereavement support, volunteer opportunities, contributions or the April special event "An Evening with Hope Edelman," author of the international bestseller *Motherless Daughters*, contact Mommy's Light Lives On Fund, P.O. Box 494, Lionville, Pennsylvania, 19353; (610) 725-9790 or visit www.mommyslight.org.

It Takes a Village... to Build a Community

Bob Hankin, President & CEO
The Hankin Group

"We care most about those who live and work among us, because they have the biggest impact on our lives."

— Thomas Hylton

On any Tuesday evening in the summer, signs point the way to the town-center concert. Residents walk along the trails as they head to the park where dozens of children race around the walkways. Parents open lawn chairs and spread picnic blankets on the grass. Neighbors greet each other as dogs bark at an occasional hot-air balloon drifting by. The music begins. "It's like living in a Norman Rockwell painting," describes Deborah Cullinan, a resident and shopkeeper of Eagleview, a community development created by The Hankin Group.

Originally designed as a 400-acre corporate park, Eagleview has evolved into an integrated, holistic community that Bob Hankin, President and CEO of The Hankin Group, hopes is the future of Chester County. Now comprising over 800 acres, Eagleview is home to corporate offices, retail stores, a main street, residences and open spaces. The