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*Robin Renee  
Special to Courier News  
Courier News*

## **Parenting** to a different beat

Through drumming workshops,

**Sharon Silverstein** teaches kids and parents

about "Living At Peace"

By **ROBIN RENÉE**

Correspondent

One of the great things about the winter holiday season is that it brings out the intention of "Peace On Earth" for so many of us.

Remembering the human potential for a peaceful existence at any time is always a good thing, but what about the rest of the year?

For **Sharon Silverstein** of Hillsborough, that message is not lost save for December. With a dedication to teaching to children and all those around them communication skills that lead to empowerment, love and healthful modes of expression, she is the founder and president of her own series of experiential workshops called Living At Peace.

"I founded Living At Peace in November of 2002," explained **Silverstein**, 37. "I was a public school teacher for 14 years and was taking a series of personal-growth seminars (that August). One of (them) was a 10-day women's leadership seminar in California on a ranch."

In seeking their leadership qualities, the women were asked to do something that takes a lot of courage - each woman went camping completely alone.



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"During that solo camp, I conceived the idea for Living At Peace," **Silverstein** said.

The time for reflection on that ranch allowed **Silverstein** to recognize the good that could come from developing unique personal growth programs for kids. She developed workshops like "Positive Thoughts, Positive Attitudes" and "Family FUNctioning," each designed with the Living At Peace mission in mind: providing tools and techniques to realize and overcome self-limiting beliefs.

Playing drums may not at first seem like a teaching tool, but **Silverstein's** drumming circles for kids offer a fun and surprising way for participants to learn a lot of her core principles. It is, literally, a hands-on activity to help facilitate awareness of self-limiting patterns of thought.

"We sit in a circle, and I'll first create a sense of safety by drumming all together," she explained. Later, the group will drum a constant rhythm, allowing each in turn to play a solo. "How did it feel right before time to take your solo?" she might ask some children afterward. "Nervous," "excited," and "I thought I would do it wrong" are common responses. From there, the group may discuss any negative thought patterns and the nervous ones are encouraged to go back and try again.

Call-and-response drumming also teaches communication skills.

"If you give a clear call, you get a clear response," **Silverstein** said. "If you don't get a clear response, were you clear?" Again, the discussion easily turns to issues of daily life. "How can you be clearer in words with friends and parents?" she might ask, developing an understanding of how to communicate with specificity. The overall effect is one of cultivating a connection to self-worth as well as teamwork. "There is no right or wrong when we are creating from our hearts," **Silverstein** said. "Everyone playing an instrument there counts, and we use our own individuality to create even a grander result. (It cultivates) a sense of synergy, teamwork and cooperation."

Originally from Old Bridge, **Silverstein** received her bachelor's of music and teacher's certificate from Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University. She went on to train with the Florida-based International Network for Children and Families and became a certified parent educator, qualifying her to instruct teachers, aides and teacher's assistants. Her workshops often blend concepts and exercises she learned at the network with her own material. She taught public school in Pemberton Township, East Windsor and Berkeley Heights. But perhaps much of her education in family life, teaching and parenting comes from direct experience. She has been married for 15 years; she and husband Robert have a 7-year old, Jared.

Living At Peace challenges one of the main paradigms of parenting as most of us know it - that the parent rules by decree from above.

She outlines the differences between that familiar form of autocratic parenting versus the democratic method she prefers. In the autocratic method of parenting, "children have few choices. (There is) punishment and reward, making threats, comparison to others and guilt to motivate kids." The democratic method includes "letting children make their own decisions and giving them more choices along with clear and firm limits, and encouraging them from within."

"When I launched the company, I realized that for what I was teaching to have a lasting effect, you have to touch the lives of parents and teachers. It helps kids get the same messages from important adults," **Silverstein** said. Her five-week parenting course is a result of that realization, along with her two-hour workshop, called "Parenting with Intention."

In this class designed to help adults shift their thinking about parenting, setting an intention sets the tone as the first activity.

"I have parents focus on what they want for themselves, as opposed to what they don't want. I am a big believer in what Mother Teresa said: 'What you put your intention toward expands.'"

Other activities in "Parenting with Intention" include guided visualization to see the

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positive end result of intentions set and discussion on how to respond, rather than to react to children's misbehavior.

One of **Silverstein's** favorite activities in the class is a role play to prompt Genuine Encounter Moments.

Participants separate into pairs. One, in the role of a child, shows the other, as the parent, a butterfly. First, the "parent" is inattentive, and the "child" feels directly what it is like to be ignored. Next, the "parent" gives focused attention and responds with interest. According to **Silverstein**, with only 20 seconds of a Genuine Encounter Moment, a child's needs to feel valuable and understood are met.

Diane Thomas of East Brunswick and her 7-year-old daughter Lauren have both taken Living At Peace courses. Thomas once sat in on a class on bullying that Lauren attended, where the children learned a simple thought turnaround: "If someone is judging you, it is not about you, but about them." About six months later, Lauren came home from school, upset that she had been teased by a girl during gym.

"Let's talk about what you learned in **Sharon's** class," Thomas reminded. "She got a smile on her face and was able to handle herself," Thomas said.

Thomas recognizes that her daughter is just being a typical kid when "she can't comb her hair because there's knots in it, and she's screaming." Still, it can be easy for a mother to get frustrated and angry. She found that "Redirecting Children's Behavior" helped improve the relationship in their everyday family relationship.

Thomas said her husband "would be a very unlikely candidate for any self-help thing," though he eventually did join her in the courses.

**Silverstein** agreed that it is not easy to convince many parents to learn to achieve order in their home without heavy-handed tactics. She challenges them to ask themselves "What am I creating as a result of the method I am using? (Am I) teaching that the only way I get what I want is by threatening, overpowering (or) controlling?"

She told the story of her brother's 13-year-old, who ran up a \$50 bill on the cell phone.

"Rather than grounding him or not allowing him to watch TV, he had to work off the \$50. Or if (my brother were to) take away the cell phone for a time, it is logically related to the misbehavior." Her method teaches finding ways to "help the child repair their mistake."

When she isn't teaching, you just may find **Silverstein** performing her original music around Central Jersey coffeehouses like The Sanctuary in Somerville. Usually playing guitar and performing with a pianist, her songs reflect the essence of the concepts she teaches:

"I'm a big believer in energy, that everything carries a vibration. Our words carry a vibration because they are sound. (There are) high vibrational energies of compassion and kindness, and on the flip side we have fear and intimidation. I believe that when we speak to children, it really matters what our intention is. Spiritual teachers have been telling us this for thousands of years - Wayne Dyer, Deepak Chopra, Buddha and the Zen teachings - what we give out is what comes back. It's a universal law."

**Sharon Silverstein** is the founder and president of Living at Peace, a series of experiential workshops designed to help parents and children to develop healthful relationships.

STAFF PHOTOS BY KATHY JOHNSON

**Sharon Silverstein** of Hillsborough conducts workshops that use drumming and other activities to enhance

relationships and improve communication between parents and children.

A parenting tip from **Sharon Silverstein**:

"In the midst of a situation, step back. Pause when you feel anger or frustration coming up. Ask yourself,

'What do I want to teach my child right now?

What is the value I want to teach my child?'

In that pause, find a way to calm down."

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