

an advocate for compassion

Stephanie Ansaldo Wins the College's First Social Justice Award

by Andrea Cooper

Elie Wiesel, the world-famous humanitarian, author, Holocaust survivor, and Nobel Laureate for Peace, was coming to Charlotte. The pressure was on for Stephanie Ansaldo, who had invited him. She needed to make sure he was treated well and given meaningful opportunities to influence young people.

Ansaldo, a College of Education counseling graduate and counselor at Charlotte Latin School, packed his visit with activity. There were lectures and discussions with students across the city, a writing contest, an art contest, and more. But what left him speechless was the greeting at the airport. Ansaldo had arranged for a choir of children to sing Hebrew and Yiddish songs to welcome him. Later, he admitted, "I've been greeted by kings and presidents, but never by children singing."

At the end of the visit, in the car on the way back to the airport, Ansaldo was elated. After all this work, she thought she could relax a bit. But Wiesel wasn't through – or, rather, he decided Ansaldo wasn't. "What are you going to do next?" he asked, looking intently at his host. "You can't stop now. You must do more, and I'll help you. You have the blueprint for an organization." He offered seed money and his assistance.

When Elie Wiesel asks you to do something, you do it. At least, Ansaldo did. She left Charlotte Latin in 1997 to start The Echo Foundation, whose mission is "to sponsor and facilitate those voices that speak of human dignity, justice and moral courage in a way that leads to positive action for humankind."

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Photo by George Lainis

Stephanie Ansaldo with Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel (above) and children in the village of Rwinkwavu, Rwanda (opposite).



partner with Nobel laureate

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Among other projects, the organization has brought eight Nobel Laureates to Charlotte, along with such dignitaries as Bernard Kouchner, founder of Doctors Without Borders. Some 12,000 high school students have spent months studying the work of these leaders, then talked

with them in person. The goal: To inspire students' compassion, sense of justice, and ethical decision-making.

For her pioneering work with The Echo Foundation, Stephanie Ansaldo has won the first Bob Barret Social Justice Award from UNC Charlotte. Presented for the first time in

October 2008, the award honors a counselor who is making a difference in the community by working to make his or her community a more accepting and compassionate place for clients who are under-served or facing discrimination.

What the award committee saw in Ansaldo, Elie Wiesel saw, too. "I was touched by her sincerity and her compassion for people who need compassion," he says. "That was clear to me from the moment I saw her."

Having what she needed to make a difference

Ansaldo embodies the harmony between peoples that she works to cultivate in others: Her father was a Jewish military officer from the United States; her mother, a German national. She lived with her two sisters, parents, and grandparents in a bilingual family that moved from place to place. Today, she describes herself as "half Jewish, half international woman," with a connection to women all over the world.

Ansaldo lived in Austria after college. Her college sweetheart came there to propose and bring her back home to the United States. She was a mom in Charlotte with two sons when she made a big decision to volunteer with Hospice. Ansaldo wanted to give back to the community, but couldn't shake her nerves as she paid her first visit to a dying woman. What could Ansaldo possibly have to offer?

The pair chatted amiably, but the dying woman's eyes kept returning to the ornate, dusty curtains on her window. Bed-ridden, the woman hadn't been able to clean them in months. "I can do that!" Ansaldo volunteered. They talked through the afternoon while Ansaldo washed and re-hung the draperies. "There's nothing you



could have done that would have meant more to me,” the woman said in thanks.

Ansaldo learned an important lesson that day: “It was a metaphor that we each have whatever we need to make a difference in another person’s life.”

Her work with Hospice led her to seek an M.A. in Community Counseling from UNC Charlotte. The university, she says, prepared her extremely well to be a family therapist. “To be asked into the intimacy of a family, usually at the moments of its greatest despair, is an honor,” she believes.

At Echo, her mission would be to use those healing skills to bring together disparate people across the city and beyond. It was the kind of idealistic, do-gooder vision that could have inspired more eye-rolling than donations. But Ansaldo is persuasive.

Donor Sally Robinson learned that during their first conversation. “I had just finished working on a capital campaign and had no intention of getting involved in anything else. Thirty minutes later, after meeting Stephanie and hearing about the vision that she and Professor Wiesel had for The Echo Foundation, I was hooked,” Robinson says.

Donations are invested in projects for local students, such as the “Footsteps in Rwanda” initiative. Twelve students took part last year. They studied the country’s past and present, raised money for a primary school, and spent two weeks in the country meeting leaders involved in Rwanda’s recovery after genocide.

For a young organization, Echo has made a big impact, Robinson believes. “Already, former Echo Foundation student leaders are distinguishing themselves as young humanitarians, both on their college campuses and through service projects in third-world countries,” she says.

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She credits Ansaldo’s determination as the force behind Echo’s success in Charlotte.

So does Wiesel. “In ten years, she has managed to establish Echo as one of the major factors in cultural life and surely, in ethics,” he says. How would he describe Stephanie Ansaldo to someone who doesn’t know her? “She’s worth knowing.”

Counseling a community

When it came time at the College of Education to choose the first Bob Barret award recipient, Barret and counseling department chair Susan Furr realized they wanted to highlight someone whose work was bigger than individual counseling. Once they determined that, there was no question the winner would be Ansaldo.

“She took an idea about advocacy and created an entire organization around ways to advocate for people who are disadvantaged by social condition,” says Furr. “She has such a passion for trying to help people from different backgrounds, cultures and nationalities. She wants to get people together to examine what keeps us apart.”

The work with high school students will have a lasting impact, Furr predicts. It’s all about “getting them to see they have a voice. They can take action. They can be involved. (Ansaldo is) developing people who will be leaders later. These kids take what they’ve learned back to their families and other classmates.”

The judges were also impressed with Echo’s annual Award Against Indifference, honoring local heroes. Though advocacy often goes unnoticed, Ansaldo “shines a light on the work that gets done in the community,” Furr says. The award this year went to the Charlotte law firm of Ferguson Stein Chambers Gresham & Sumter, the first integrated law firm in North Carolina.

Today, Ansaldo still thinks of herself as a “systems therapist,” except the system she serves is not just children and families, but communities. Her current focus is a curriculum based upon the work of Paul Farmer, M.D., who visited Charlotte in March. Farmer’s organization, Partners In Health, builds hospitals and develops strategies to provide healthcare to the rural poor.

For the future, Ansaldo hopes to bring the Dalai Lama to Charlotte, as well as a gathering of Nobel Laureates for an environmental summit. When she retires from Echo – someday – she’d like to study for a Ph.D.

For now, she’s still working to fulfill Wiesel’s expectations from that long ago car ride. “His belief in me is a tremendous motivator,” she says. “To be worthy of his confidence keeps me awake at night.”

So far, so good. “Elie Wiesel gave Stephanie a challenge and an opportunity,” says Sally Robinson. “She has given a magnificent response.”

For more about The Echo Foundation, see echofoundation.org.