

Where manners and etiquette are concerned, Cynthia Merrill understands ...

The 12-second Rule

By Joshua Tehee
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Twelve seconds.
That's what you get with most people before they've made up their mind about you — a first impression.

Twelve seconds for a lifetime of training. "In 12 seconds the words that come out of your mouth can make or break it," says Cynthia Merrill, who founded a performing arts school in the 1970s and now runs Cynthia Merrill Projects, which provides manner and etiquette courses, ballroom dance lessons and public speaking and business consulting.

Merrill knows how important those 12 seconds can be.

She is the go-to woman for all things mannered and proper.

Need to know a simple ballroom dance step, a waltz perhaps? Merrill can show you.

Her cotillion classes — based on the formal balls given to debutantes — have taught thousands of boys and girls to fox-trot, cha-cha and swing. She taught more than 500 fifth- to 12th-graders last year.

Need to know which way to pass the peas at dinner? Who to introduce first at a party? Merrill knows that, too.

The dining room of her Fig Garden home is formally set with china and linens, ready for etiquette classes, where students — both children and adults — learn the ins and outs of proper table manners.

For instance: Always pass the salt and pepper together. And: Sit the guest of honor to the right of the head of the table.

When Merrill speaks, it's with the



Cynthia Merrill teaches children some simple ballroom dance steps. She has taught thousands of children since she started teaching the courses.

Photo: Perry Cooper

slightest hint of an accent — a leftover from her East Coast upbringing, where manners and etiquette are taught at an early age, she says.

Her father was a true gentleman, she says, though she never saw him as such until she started reading etiquette books. "He did everything the books were saying he should."

Even in his worst times, even on his deathbed, he was a gentleman. The nurses, Merrill says, were impressed by his manners, even at the very end.

"I just wanted that from my own sons," she says. So, the learning began early.

Holiday gifts were only enjoyed after thank you notes were written. If friends were invited over, they were properly introduced. She taught her first cotillon class to her son ^{Cyrus} ~~Titan's~~ fifth grade class.

As all things with parents, it wasn't always easily accepted, says Merrill's ^{oldest} ~~youngest~~ son, Cyrus. But eventually they learned. He still thinks of his mother every holiday season.

But the teaching wasn't just for her family.

Carol Anderson's daughter Meghan started dancing at Merrill's school when she was 3. Anderson wasn't sure about the classes at first — Meghan was young and it was a large time commitment. But her daughter came away from her first recital beaming and full of confidence. "And I was sold from that moment," she says.

You see, the dancers learned more than simple routines. They learned personal responsibility and how to become better people, Anderson says.

From time to time, that meant giving up certain things. Maybe Meghan had to skip hanging out with friends so she could get in an extra practice. She did have to meet up with her prom date after rehearsal for the big recital. She changed on the way.

Others notice these things. By the time Meghan was in the fourth grade, other mothers wanted to know what was different about her child. The answer was Cynthia Merrill.

J. Orta was just a goofy kid, an 18-year old in army pants and combat boots when he walked into Merrill's school looking for a job as a dance instructor. He wasn't the

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Cynthia Merrill watches two children at one of her ballroom dancing classes.
Photo: Perry Cooper





Cynthia Merrill opened a performing arts school in the 1970s. Now she runs Cynthia Merrill Projects, where she offers courses on public speaking, business manners and etiquette and ballroom dance lessons.

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most polished, but Merrill liked his charisma and took him under her wing, taught him to be a better teacher, a better businessman, and, yes, a better person, he says.

With Merrill, there's no excuse not to be your best.

Shyness is not tolerated, Orta says. She'll take the hand of a shy child, softly say, "sweetie, honey, look into my eyes," and usually, that's all it takes.

Because, contrary to popular thought, this is stuff the children, especially the boys, want to know. Some come to classes eagerly, some — her own sons, even — get dragged in by the ear, Merrill says. But they all leave feeling good about themselves and the knowledge they have gained.

And Merrill is a wealth of knowledge. Even in her down time she works to learn more.

She's a rabid reader — right now it's political non-fiction, Barack Obama's autobiography. When her son Than played football — he played at Stanford and Yale before playing a year with the Chicago Bears — she read the biographies of all the great quarterbacks.

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Above: Nicholas Knowles gets to demonstrate a slip with Cynthia Merrill during one of her bathroom dance classes.

Right: Cynthia Merrill sits at her dining room table, which is formally set with china and linens. She teaches etiquette courses from her home.

Photos: Perry Cooper



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Now, of course, the world is still full of those who don't know about manners.

Most stuff — talking on the cell phone while standing in line at the airport — she can let slip. Unless it involves children. Then she feels a duty to step forward and help out.

"I'm setting myself up for a parent to clobber me, scream at me, yell at me," she says. But they don't.

You see, Merrill's not some crotchety old lady yelling at the kids to get off her lawn. Rules and manners are not taught in a do-this-because-I-say fashion.

Merrill explains the implications of those actions, the good and bad.

"And she does that with every child," Orta says. Make that everyone she knows.

Talking with Merrill, even conversations about her, end up being about you. Orta has to set aside time to talk with her, knowing it will be an hour-long affair, at least. Merrill never just left a message with Cyrus' college roommate. It was always a lengthy conversation, Cyrus says.

Maybe it's just 12 seconds, what you get with most people before they make up their mind about you.

Merrill wants to make sure those seconds count.

"She really wants what's best for everyone," Cyrus says. "She wants to see everyone succeed." ■