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## Holocaust survivor still spreads positive message

*Wilmette resident stays active with community*

by Alan P. Henry, September 2, 2011

The motto by which Walter Reed has led a compellingly textured life is a simple one: You have to pay rent for the space you occupy on Earth.

By any measure, the 87-year-old Wilmette resident has paid a lot of rent – as an Army serviceman during World War II, longtime advocate for children with special needs, tireless community servant, and Holocaust survivor whose positive message speaks of moral strength and heroism.

"A lot of awful stuff goes on in the world. It's been this way for centuries and there isn't a thing you can do about it," Reed said. "I think the only way you can counteract that is to do what you can do to make the world a better place, one person and one thing at a time."

Reed was born Werner Rindsberg in Germany in 1924 and spent his early childhood in Bavaria. In 1939, his family sent him to safety in Belgium as part of a children refugee rescue program. He soon fled to La Hille, France, where he and 99 other Jewish children were hidden from the Germans.

In 1941, he sailed to New York, where his mother had relatives. Only much later in life did he learn that his parents and siblings had perished during the Holocaust.

In 1943, he was naturalized and changed his name to Walter Reed. Drafted into the U.S. Army, he served in France shortly after the Allied invasion of Normandy.

After the war, he received a degree in journalism from the University of Missouri. From 1951 to 1958, he was a fundraiser for non-profit organizations. For the next 31 years, he was a public relations executive with the American vending machine industry and garnered a worldwide reputation as an industry expert.

Reed and his wife Jeanne married in 1969 and moved to Wilmette four years later. They had three sons: Brian, Andrew and McRae, all of whom attended District 39 schools.

Brian, their first son, was born with cerebral palsy, and both Reed and his wife became special needs advocates.

In 1977, Reed was an Illinois delegate to the White House conference on persons with disabilities.

"I began to see that you can be disabled and very able," Reed said.

He also took a leadership position on the board of the Anixter Center in Chicago and continues to this day to offer encouragement to the parents of children with special needs.

Of Brian, he said: "We have adapted to [his cerebral palsy] by seeing what he can do instead of what he can't."

Reed was the recipient of the Wilmette District 39 Educational Foundation's 2010 Distinguished Citizen Award, in part for his advocacy on behalf of children with special needs.

His community service has also included leadership on the Board of the Chicago Metropolitan Planning Council.

For the past three years, Reed has been annual giving chair for the Rotary Foundation, which provides funding for humanitarian projects around the country and the world. He has been an active Rotarian for 19 years.

One project the Reeds particularly care about is funding for educational software for schools that teach destitute children in Nicaragua.

To raise awareness of Rotary's mission, Reed gives up to 30 speeches a year at Rotary clubs in Northern Illinois.

He also speaks roughly 30 times a year for the Illinois Holocaust Museum, appearing at the museum, schools and outside groups like the men's club at the North Shore Senior Center and the Wilmette Historical Society.

In those appearances, Reed goes beyond the numbers of Jews killed in concentration camps to talk more about the day-to-day abuse many suffered before they were sent to the camps.

The lesson to be absorbed today:

"You have to learn that if you see somebody doing something to somebody else that is not what it should be, do you stand by or do you do something? Reed questioned. "Do you go out and help them?"

He also focuses on the positive, the people he calls "the heroes of La Hille." Those were the Jewish parents who sent their children to safety before the Germans could take them, knowing as mothers and fathers that they would quite probably never see their children again.

Reed has written a book – "The Heroes of La Hille" – that awaits a publisher, and he and his wife have arranged or attended several reunions with other La Hille survivors in the past 15 years.

How does Reed maintain his enthusiasm for life? A part of it, he said, comes from having learned from early tribulations.

"I found that if you keep a positive attitude you can hopefully overcome all kinds of adversities," Reed said. "Early on, at age 18 or 19, I decided the Nazis had ruined enough of my life. They weren't going to get one more day."

As for the secret to staying young at heart: "My secret is: 'Don't say no. Say, let's give it a shot,'" he said.

This month, the Reeds are giving a bike trip through the Tyrolean Alps in Austria a shot. To train for it, he's been biking the Green Bay Trail for two months, in addition to his three times a week regimen at the Center Fitness Club.

"The question is, 'What can I do and what can I learn?'" Reed said. "Once you take that attitude you have a totally different life, and that applies whether you are 45 or 87."