



A passion for politeness

Judi the Manners Lady teaches lessons of good behaviour to children and adults

By Dana Tye

Her name precedes her. Judi Johnston Vankevich—a.k.a. Judi the Manners Lady—is the woman with a burning desire to civilize children—and their grown-up counterparts—everywhere. And she’s fast becoming a household name in homes and schools, on CD players and Web sites, and at bookstores, radio stations and TV screens across North America—and beyond.

To young and old, she’s simply known as The Manners Lady. So it’s no surprise that any self-respecting mother of a 4-year-old—en route to meeting the semi-famous Vankevich in person—is bound to feel a little nervous. Is it *de rigueur* to introduce one’s full professional title at the door? Extend a firm handshake? Be grateful one’s occasionally difficult little boy declined to come along for the ride?

And then the front door opens as wide as Vankevich’s smile. In a country minute, the former fashion model has allayed her guest’s concerns with a warm hug, eager chatter and a cup of something frothy from the blender in

Judi Johnston Vankevich delivers her message of good manners with pictures, songs and a 500-megawatt smile.

her Langley, British Columbia, kitchen.

“I really believe in the importance of being real, not fake,” Vankevich says. “Your manners reflect who you are. And that’s a message for everyone, not just kids.”

Thankfully, Vankevich comes across as anything but the stern, old-fashioned matron her business name suggests. Perhaps that’s a function of her upbringing, as one of five lively and well-loved kids who helped run father Burt’s family grocery in rural Bolton, Ontario. Or maybe it’s because Parisian fashion agents ranked sparkle ahead of glamour when they deemed her worthy of top assignments at 18. She remembers, “During the auditions, the other girls were way prettier and a lot skinnier. The agents said, ‘We picked you because we thought you’d be fun.’”

Vankevich’s energy and enthusiasm made her a natural fit for the role of children’s entertainer. She grew up touring as one of four singing Johnston sisters, then earned a master’s degree in law and government at Trinity Western University with the hope of one day becoming prime minister. After heading a modelling agency in Virginia Beach, Virginia, Vankevich was driven to teach children good manners when she came across young models trying to get ahead on looks alone. “They would open their mouths and all this garbage language would come out. Suddenly their beauty would go away,” she recalls.

Vankevich began teaching manners in her home, with the help of her then 4-year-old daughter, Alexi, and a circle of interested friends and neighbours keen to offer their kids an alternative to “child-centred” parenting. Using songs, storytelling, role-playing and humour, Vankevich developed material for a hit CD and stage show, and grateful parents encouraged her to take her message on the road. Soon she became a staple in elementary and high schools, along with grown-up gatherings, teaching self-control and regard for others to youngsters, respect for



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authority and anti-bullying behaviour to teenagers and on-the-job etiquette to adults.

Vankevich says her success grew from a keen awareness she was fulfilling a social need. “I wasn’t looking to start a business. But I love teaching, I love kids and I love music; and parents were clamouring for this stuff,” she says. “Besides, I thought of this as a good hobby until I run for office,” she adds with a laugh.

With an upcoming Manners Lady TV show, a syndicated newspaper column and another book, *Manners Are Cool* (her first book was *Manners Are Fun*), due out in December, Vankevich has put her higher-office ambitions on hold. “I want to change the world by influencing the next generation,” she declares. “Society is so much happier when people look out for others rather than just looking out for number one.” ☐

Dana Tye is a Vancouver-based freelance writer who occasionally becomes a Bad Manners Monster when her son forgets the golden rule.

