

The ADVOCATE

Etiquette expert gives Stamford audience modern-day pointers

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STAMFORD -- Etiquette may evolve, but good manners never go out of style.

That was the message from etiquette expert and former Darien resident Peggy Post, who spoke to senior citizens about modern-day manners at the Edgehill retirement community Tuesday morning.

The importance of politeness has become particularly visible this past week, with public displays of rudeness by Congressman Joe Wilson, tennis star Serena Williams and rapper Kanye West grabbing national headlines, Post said.

"I think bad behavior can remind us how important good behavior is," she said.

Post is the great granddaughter-in-law of Emily Post, who wrote the manners handbook "Etiquette" as well as several other books on how to behave. Almost 50 years after Emily Post's death, the family continues to spread her message of civility through the Emily Post Institute, for which Peggy Post acts as a spokeswoman and author.

"We have a lot of people asking us, is etiquette still alive and well in today's world?" she said.

Because manners are constantly evolving, some of the older rules of etiquette are now outdated, Post said. It used to be considered polite for a man, when being introduced to a woman, to wait for her to extend her hand first for the handshake. This practice is no longer relevant, Post said.

Removing your hat as a sign of respect is still accepted as proper etiquette, however. This practice developed centuries ago, when knights wearing metal armor would flip open their visors or remove their helmets as a sign of respect, Post said.

A woman in the audience asked how etiquette experts determine what is appropriate behavior for new technologies like cell phones and e-mail.

"It's really a collective decision on how we use cell phones politely," Post said. "The determination is based on what will make the most people comfortable."

When in public, it is polite to turn cell phone ringers off and leave the room discreetly if you need to make a call, Post said. Texting under the table during dinner or having a long phone conversation when you're out with someone else is also considered rude.

"She pretty much confirmed manners of etiquette that I already knew about," Patricia Englert, of Cos Cob, said after the event. "I wish my grandchildren were here."

Patricia Masia, who was visiting a friend in Stamford Tuesday morning, bought an etiquette book for children. She said she planned to bring it back to her church's library in Brooklyn.

"I think people don't think about other people anymore," Masia said.

While many complain that good manners are absent in today's society, Post said she believes people still possess the essential kindness required to behave politely.

"I don't think we're any ruder than we were 80 years ago," she said. "We're just more crowded and more rushed."

Etiquette Tips from Peggy Post: Don't hide behind e-mail for conversations you should have face-to-face. Don't use e-mail to fire someone or to quit your job. If you feel the need to help someone with their manners, do it kindly and in a way that allows them to save face. Be very careful about approaching strangers because you can never be sure how they will react. "Sometimes you speak up, sometimes you don't. But when you do, do it kindly," Post said. If you can't remember someone's name when you are introducing them, don't panic, it happens to everyone. Make the introduction anyway. You may choose to be upfront about the situation, and say something like "I'm very sorry but I can't remember your name." If you are in a movie theater and you are sitting behind someone who is talking loudly, you may want to tap him or her on the shoulder and ask them politely to be quiet. If the person is talking really loudly or is seated far away, you may want to avoid a confrontation and instead go get the theater manager or simply move your seat. If you are concerned about the spread of flu or other contagious illnesses, simply smile and say "Excuse me for not shaking your hand, but with the swine flu going around my physician has recommended that I avoid shaking hands."