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## America's best-mannered city

**Ladies and gentlemen, you are cordially invited to enjoy this article about the genteel residents of . . .**

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CHARLESTON, S.C. -- In this typically Southern city, proper manners are a way of life. People say "hello" when they pass strangers on the street, children learn to say "please" as soon as they can speak and men still stand when a woman gets up from the table.

It came as no surprise to residents here that for 10 years in a row, this genteel city was named the best-mannered city in America. Three Illinois cities -- Peoria, Moline and Rock Island -- have consistently made the Top 10.

The designation, bestowed by etiquette expert Marjabelle Young Stewart, who has compiled the list for 28 years, might not mean much to the rest of the world. But in Charleston, which has built a thriving tourism industry around its Southern charm, the title -- determined by suggestions from tourists -- is a source of pride.

"It's just the way people are here, and we are very proud of it," said Mayor Joseph Riley. "But because we have good manners, it's not something we campaign for."

In recent years interest in etiquette has risen because people feel threatened by what they perceive as a decline in basic American values, according to experts. Since the 1990s, there has been a growing movement to offer character and manners classes in public schools, teaching students politeness, honesty and respect for adults.

Businesses are contracting with etiquette schools in an attempt to boost employee development by teaching people how to shake hands properly and figure out which fork to use at a company dinner. While this might seem far-fetched, a study by Harvard University and the Carnegie Foundation found that 85 percent of job success depends on social skills, while only 15 percent is determined by technical skills and knowledge.

"People always ask me, 'Isn't etiquette old school?'" said Cindy Grosso, owner of the Charleston School of Protocol and Etiquette. "I tell them that we need it now more than ever. We live in a

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world where globalization is so out there and there are so many different political and religious beliefs. They might not be our own but we need to be able to respect them."

For many longtime Charleston residents, good manners are passed down from one generation to another. They generally believe it is the job of the parents to make sure children at an early age grasp one of the most important mores of the South.

Rising above the pack

On a recent afternoon, The Hat Ladies of Charleston met for tea at a downtown hotel. Dressed in their trademark frilly hats, the women in the social club that also does community service began discussing manners.

"Good manners give you an edge on the competition in a world where people are competing for jobs and everything. It raises you above the pack and leads toward a more civilized society," said Susan Fasola, 57, a transplanted Southern belle; she moved to Charleston from New Jersey eight years ago.

Susan Weekley, 67, born and raised in Charleston, said good manners were part of her upbringing and she tried to instill those values in her children.

"When I was growing up, manners were taught in home-economics class. We learned the proper way to use utensils at the table, how to write thank-you notes and to be nice to elders," she said. "I was taught to say 'yes ma'am' and to wait for a gentleman to open the door for me. I still expect men to do that."

Barbara Burkel, president of the group, said that doing tea is not just about socializing, it's about networking and building self-esteem.

"We enjoy walking down the street with our head up," said Burkel, adding that the group performs a lot of community service in the area. "When you look good, you feel good and when you feel good, you do good."

Municipal Court Judge Michael Molony, another lifelong Charleston resident, said it becomes more difficult to retain traditions as more people move to the area.

"My mama always taught us that when a lady walks into the room, you stand up, pull her chair out and let her sit. I do that routinely," said Molony.

In 2002, Molony started the Livability Court in Charleston, which deals with problems ranging from loud parties to barking dogs to feuding neighbors. According to the judge, the court gives people an outlet to vent their anger, which helps the city maintain civility.

'Slow down and just listen'

"When I was growing up, people knew their neighbors. Nowadays, people don't know each other so there is more tension," Molony said. "In Livability Court, we slow down and just listen to people. Then we help them solve the problem so that they can go back and live together."

The history of manners in the South, however, has not always been positive. Manners were used in the past to establish power and authority of one group over another--the rich over the poor or whites over blacks, said Ted Owenby, who teaches history and Southern studies at the University of Mississippi.

"There is no question that manners were once used as a segregation tool. Those in charge wanted all of Southern society to internalize certain behaviors so they would not be questioned," said Owenby. "Blacks weren't allowed to make eye contact with whites, they were expected to move off the sidewalk when whites approached and address whites down to the age of 6 or 8 as 'miss' or 'mister.'"

Many Southern cities, according to Owenby, have managed to sidestep the negative aspects of history and focus on the positive. He said tearooms, bed and breakfast inns, and events that involve manners have become a big part of the tourist industry.

"They market their connections to tradition, and they are able to sell to a national or international audience that things like good manners represent something positive about their history, something other areas don't have," said Owenby.

"So when people go to cities like Charleston, they act different, just like you act different at the beach or you act different when you're at Wrigley Field. They are experiencing a part of Southern culture."

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