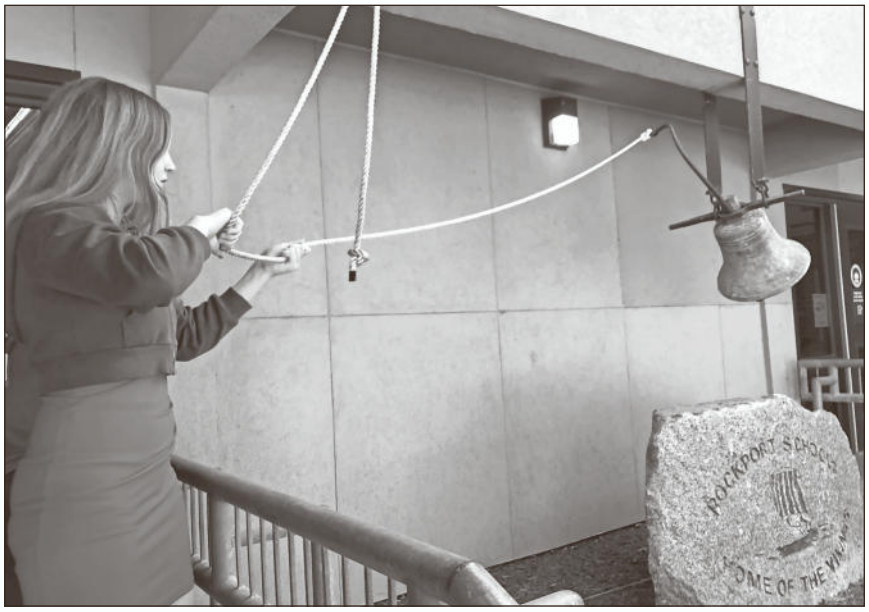
We all have a chance to leave a legacy

Robert E. Liebow



As my decade-long tenure as the superintendent of Schools in Rockport comes to a close by way of retirement this June after a career spanning 44 years helping to guide and shape the lives of countless children who have or will inherit this planet we all call home, I recently experienced one of the most poignant, yet at the same time deeply inspiring and truly hopeful moments I have ever experienced as an educator.

The day was Friday, March 11, exactly at 11 a.m. that I came upon a group of 11 of our Rockport Middle School students gathered at lunchtime in front of our historic bronze school bell located between the entrance doors at the high school. I watched silently as one by one they stepped forward and solemnly and respectfully took turns pulling the sally at the end of that magnificent bell's cord as it let out a distinctive and loud tintinnabulation that filled the air around their beloved school building, once each minute for a total of 11 times.

Curious as to what had just transpired, I went directly up to the group and inquired what they were doing and asked of course, as a typical administrator would do, why they weren't in class where they belonged? They all turned at once and stared at me very politely but without making a sound until one young girl spoke up quite firmly but with the softest and most reassuring of voices that they were there because we are all at the 11th hour facing a major turning point in our history and confronting a potential point of no return. She went on to say with conviction, "If we didn't do something quickly that was significant and meaningful to impact the effects of climate change in a positive way that the clock could soon run out for all of us and that we might ultimately lose the ongoing environmental battle to save our planet during their lifetimes." Then, they all said in unison that they would be back to repeat this ceremonial bell ringing 11 more times on the 11th day of each month at the 11th hour, in conjunction with similar ceremonies at many churches in our area, until the adults that have the ultimate power through their vote and by their actions supported the commitment to implementing meaningful measures that would stabilize the negative effects of climate change on our world.

Once this small group of students returned peacefully to their classes for the rest of the afternoon, I reflected upon the stark realization that these young people represented our collective future as a civilized society and deserved to inherit a better world than the one we were handing to them. When I returned to my office I just happened to open an email from our town administrator that contained the warrant articles for the upcoming Rockport Annual Town Meeting to be held on Saturday, April 2. After reviewing the last set of school-related financial articles to be sure everything was in order to justify our budget request to the voters, my attention quickly was drawn to Article J on the warrant, the Rockport Municipal Resolution for Net Zero Energy. After a thorough reading of the initiative, I quickly came to the realization that by supporting the fundamental concepts represented in this article on the floor of town meeting, I would be demonstrating to these same young people who I had just encountered something very meaningful and extremely powerful. Through my actions, I would have my best opportunity to show them that the adults in their community who were of voting age truly cared about what comes next for our planet and were committed to the non-bonding aspirational goal of developing meaningful strategies and implementing effective practices as soon as possible to combat the devastating impacts of climate change.

With a simple push of the button on my clicker I would be helping to set in motion the necessary strategic planning and bold steps necessary to limit the burning of fossil fuels and reduce our carbon emissions that have so adversely impacted our fragile coastal ecosystems and overall economy. It was at that very moment in time that I decided that one of my final and most important gifts to our young people before I left the Rockport Schools would be to react favorably to the basic principles as set forth in Article J as a clear symbol that I would always cherish and invest in their futures after I had left them and would forever embrace their inherent right, and their own children's right, to continue to live and prosper on a healthy planet earth.

If you are a Rockport resident, I encourage you to join me at our upcoming Town Meeting to put our mutual and collective stamp of approval, as is simultaneously happening in many of our neighboring communities in Essex County, on this most notable of aspirational goals as part of our combined legacy to support to the best of our ability those precious young lives that will follow in our footsteps.

Robert E. Liebow is the superintendent of the Rockport Public Schools.