

## The savagery of following the crowd

During a recent symposium at Germantown Friends School, Robert Coles, the Harvard social psychiatrist and Pulitzer Prize-winning author known for his research on the moral development of children, defined character as "how you behave when no one is looking."

He suggested that it takes a great deal of moral courage to act as an individual when confronted with adversity, even greater courage to forgive those who have done wrong, and that there is a need for such lessons in the education of today's youth.

Mr. Coles' plug for a greater moral context in our educational system came a day too late for Eddie Polec, who was chased down and beaten to death by a mob of Montgomery County youths.

They might have deluded themselves into believing that their machismo and brutality were justified by the fabrication of rape, but it is clear by now that they acted without any self-discipline, compassion or character. Instead, they did what all cowards do — followed the crowd.

Almost as shocking was the response of some of their peers who dismissed the incident as "something that happens when you're a kid" and "just getting caught up in the moment." It almost sounds as if it's *acceptable* to take another person's life.

Until now, most of us probably refused to believe that such a heinous act could be committed in a middle-class neighborhood like Fox Chase. Such incidents were limited to the poorer sections of the city. But now, we know better.

We know that for all the advantages we've tried to give our children, for all our concern about their welfare and our middle-class breast-beating over family values, delinquency has no class or racial barriers. We know it because this time it has hit home ... hard.

For those who live in the suburbs, Eddie Polec was the "kid next door." He wrestled for his high school, had a part-time job and served as an altar boy on Sundays. He could have been *anyone's* son, brother or friend.

The real problem, then, isn't the culture of poverty or the poverty of affluence — it's our failure as a society to raise our children with a sense of compassion for others, with respect for human decency and above all, with character.

Perhaps in the future we will listen more carefully to people like Robert Coles and other reformers who press for community service programs in our schools, a reduction in the glorification and commercialization of violence, and an increase in the quality of time we spend with our children. Only then will we have learned something from this tragic event.

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### EDITORIALS

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