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Irish-born international etiquette consultant devotes career to creating a more thoughtful and courteous approach to life

BY ARTHUR LIGHTBOURN
Contributor

When it comes to etiquette and protocol, Carmel Valley resident Marie Betts-Johnson doesn't carry a big stick, as Teddy Roosevelt once advised, but she does speak softly, with authority and aided and abetted by a charming Irish brogue.

Based in San Diego since 1989, Betts-Johnson is an Irish-born, internationally-recognized etiquette consultant, speaker and columnist who is the founder and president of the International Protocol Institute of California.

We interviewed Betts-Johnson in The Inn at Rancho Santa Fe.

Blond with dark-green eyes and a model-like demeanor, she was dressed impeccably in a black pantsuit accented with a pearl- and-diamond style brooch and a single strand of freshwater pearls.

Dressing appropriately for an occasion, she believes, is an essential aspect of etiquette and protocol. "Whether we like it or

not, the person we are on the inside is judged by what we wear on the outside."

Nor do you have to be wealthy to dress well, she says. "Good taste is what's important."

Her choice of a career, she said, came naturally to her. "The Irish are very hospitable. We entertain a lot in our home. And then I was in a convent boarding school and the nuns were tough. The strict rules became engrained in me and, even though I did not see the benefit at the time, they stood me in good stead when called upon.

"Etiquette is not about snobishness," she insists. "It's the opposite. It's all about being confident in one's self, knowing what to do and when to do it. And then putting other people at ease and respecting other people. It's that simple. But you have to know what the rules or guidelines are. I like the word 'guidelines' better than 'rules.'"
The true meaning of etiquette, she believes, is kindness.

She loves the story about the dinner guest who, when presented a finger bowl of water "with that nice slice of lemon it" mistakenly took a sip. The hostess, not wanting to embarrass her guest, followed his example.

"You see, that's the essence of etiquette," Betts-Johnson said. "It's not about putting anyone down."

But she also agrees with Mark Twain who said: "A person should be allowed a few redeeming virtues, but never bad manners."

And when it comes to common courtesy these days, sadly, she said, the frustrations are many and great. "Courtesy and thoughtfulness have become endangered practices."

On the highways, that lack of courtesy or kindness too often results in incidents of road rage, and in supermarket check-out lines (and in restaurants), "we are doomed to listen to feckless cell phone abusers who share the most inti-

mate details of their personal lives.

Then, most recently, there is the emergence of deadly cyber-bullying by "people hiding behind screens."

But, she still remains optimistic. "If you don't have hope, what's the point. And I hope there'll be more of us going out there and creating the awareness, if nothing more."

"And the good news is that anyone can learn the accepted codes of etiquette and protocol."

She was born Marie Betts in County Tipperary, Ireland, and grew up as the youngest of three children. Her family's 300-acre working farm is located about 10 miles from the town of Tipperary. She was educated in convent boarding schools and later went on to Dublin to work in the trusts and wills department of a bank.

Wanting to "see the world," she joined ALIA, the Royal Jordanian Air-



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Marie Betts-Johnson PHOTO: JON CLARK