

Consequential Strangers:

The Power of People Who Don't Seem to Matter . . . But Really Do

by Elaine Kiesling
Whitehouse

Cherry Grove resident Melinda Blau has collaborated with Karen L. Fingerman to co-author a remarkable book entitled, **CONSEQUENTIAL STRANGERS: The Power of People Who Don't Seem to Matter...But Really Do**. The book has been a labor of love for me," said Melinda. "At its core it is a very spiritual book."

The authors met via phone in 2003 when Blau called to interview Fingerman about a study she had published. Then, in 2005, Fingerman emailed Blau a chapter she had recently published about peripheral relationships. "As the first sheet of paper spit out of my printer, my eyes focused on a phrase that seemed to leap off the page," said Blau. "The title drove the book."

So just what are consequential strangers, and why are they important? The authors note that right now we are in the throes of a relationship revolution, accelerated by technology to be sure, but spurred by the growing realization that our intimates aren't enough to get us through the day. In fact, most of us already spend more time with casual acquaintances than with family members and close friends. Blau and Fingerman show how these seemingly unremarkable, limited, and sometimes temporary relationships enhance our quality of life. Everywhere we go we encounter them: neighbors, regulars at the local coffee shop, co-workers, leisure buddies, a mechanic, the mailman, the crossing guard you pass every day.

Drawing from Fingerman's work, research from many different fields, and more than 200 of Blau's interviews, the authors make a compelling case for navigating this wider social terrain. Unlike people closest to us, who know what we know, "weak ties" expand our horizons. They lead us to new ideas and allow us to stretch ourselves. We feel energized and supported by merely recognizing these connections.

CONSEQUENTIAL STRANGERS takes readers back to the past and into the present, to city streets and into virtual environments. The authors' surprising findings confirm the importance of widening the social lens:

- Consequential strangers, not intimates, are most likely to tip you off about new



Cherry Grove resident Melinda Blau is co-author of *Consequential Strangers*

jobs and lead you to other career-advancing opportunities. In fact, knowing people up and down the socioeconomic ladder increases your chances of moving up the ladder yourself.

- Studies suggest that, if you have close relations and consequential strangers in your social convoy, you are likely to live nine years longer than people who don't.
- Whether the issue is personal or global, bringing people together from different perspectives increases the likelihood of creativity, productivity, and problem-solving.
- The success of social movements and marketing campaigns is less dependent on experts than on the everyday conversations of consequential strangers.
- "Being spaces"—welcoming, safe environments that encourage connection—are a win-win, rewarding both the people who create them and those who use them.

Yet, there is a downside. The loosely linked nature of modern life can contribute to incivility and bullying in the workplace, lying, and greater use of malicious gossip as a social weapon. Blau and Fingerman also confront the raw reality that dealing with people who are different can sap our attention and trigger our own unconscious prejudice. Fortunately, diversity research also suggests that by riding out our discomfort and coalescing around mutual interests and ideas—in short, opening ourselves to consequential strangers—we can begin to discover the "hidden solidarities" that bind us as humans. Members of the tech-savvy Millennial generation who see past traditional boundaries of identity are already heading in that direction.

If, as some theorists believe, technology is propelling our species toward greater cooperation and collaboration, this humane and insightful look at the everyday people who populate our social convoys is a manifesto of that revolution. In short, *CONSEQUENTIAL STRANGERS* is a creative reexamination of relationships we take for granted and an inspirational introduction to the power of people who don't seem to matter . . . but really do. **fit**

ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

Journalist Melinda Blau, voice of the *Consequential Strangers* blog (www.consequentialstrangers.com), has been researching and reporting about relationships and social trends since the 1970s. She has written more than 80 magazine pieces and a dozen other books, including the best-selling *Baby Whisperer* series. She lives in New York City and Northampton, Massachusetts.

Psychologist Karen L. Fingerman, who coined the term "consequential strangers," is the Berner Hanley Professor and Director of Adult Family Research at Purdue University. An internationally known scholar, whose work focuses on social relationships, emotions, and aging, she has authored more than 60 articles and chapters. She lives in West Lafayette, Indiana.

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