

Every child in Mississippi has great promise and potential, and we have an obligation to help them live up to it. Part of that obligation includes teaching them to make the right choices in life.

Between October 23-31 each year, the emphasis on our obligation is increased as we observe "Red Ribbon Week" in our schools and communities. Across Mississippi, thousands of children are taking a stand for their future.

The history behind "Red Ribbon Week" began in a dirt-floored home in California, where Enrique "Kiki" Camarena grew up. After working his way through college and serving in the United States Marines, Camarena went to work with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration.

His mother tried to talk him out of it, but without any luck. "I'm only one person," he said, "but I want to make a difference."

Working undercover in Mexico in 1985, Camarena disappeared one day as he went to meet his wife for lunch. Weeks later, his body was found. He had been killed by members of a drug cartel.

His family and friends began wearing red ribbons to remember him and to demonstrate their determination to fight substance abuse. In 1988, the National Family Partnership organized the first nationwide "Red Ribbon Week," and millions of children have been involved in the years since.

There are nearly one million Mississippians under the age of 19, and the impact they will have on the future of our state is massive. We must work to make sure that impact is influenced by a desire for long-term success, not a desire for short-term satisfaction.

Drugs, alcohol and tobacco are the enemy in our work. Our weapons include a commitment to education, listening, caring, mentoring and being there for our children. We need to match our financial investment in education with a personal investment in a child's life.

We can give our children textbooks for school, but we should also take the time to coach a sports team. We can set accountability standards in education, but we need to take time to help with homework. We can talk to our children, but we have a responsibility to be there for them when it's time to listen.

Rudyard Kipling once wrote, "words are the most powerful drug used by mankind." Our kids need to find their satisfaction in words of encouragement. The end result will be worth it.

"Red Ribbon Week" comes once a year, but its message should echo around the state every day. For the children, it's a message that reinforces their promise, their worth, and their hope for the future.

For the rest of us, it's a little more simple: "I'm only one person, but I want to make a difference."