

Leading the Way

By SKIP STURMAN

Photography by MICHAEL CONWAY

Now in its seventh year, The Leadership Institute is continuing to inspire, educate and engage leaders to better serve Upper Valley communities.

On a sun-dappled November morning, smack dab in the middle of a busy work week, an eager group files into an AVA Gallery classroom in Lebanon, N.H. From all outward appearances, these students — both seasoned and young professionals — seem to have little in common except, perhaps, an abiding curiosity about this place called the Upper Valley in which they live and work.

Before today's session on "Art and the Creative Economy" can begin, however, a space must be created in the packed agenda to share insights gained at October's Education Day. Slowly but surely, a trickle of comments turns into a torrent of reflections about the day spent the previous month, engaging a variety of educators in Claremont, N.H.

"I was especially struck by the Stevens High School principal. Hearing how excited he was about bringing life to the school was really awesome."

"I thought that was a wonderful representation of a community college. It is really exciting to know that these are great options."

"One thing that really saddened me was to hear about the homeless children. I did not realize the problem was so prevalent."

All agreed that hearing directly from

educators who have their boots on the ground inspired great hope. As one class participant put it, "There was nothing better than to go through Stevens High School. I had read all of the articles about accreditation and had a total misconception. I would send my kid there in a heartbeat."

MISSION POSSIBLE

Welcome to Leadership Upper Valley, a program of Vital Communities, and its flagship Leadership Institute, whose mission it is to "inspire, educate and engage leaders to better serve Upper Valley communities."

Now in its seventh year, The Leadership Institute is designed to provide "residents in both existing and evolving leadership roles... the insights, relationships and service perspective they need to succeed and make a difference in the Upper Valley."

With 100-plus graduates and 22 more set to join the ranks come June, the collective impact of these existing and evolving leaders is starting to be felt up and down the Connecticut River. Although it may be premature for organizers to declare "mission accomplished", clearly Leadership Upper Valley is hitting its stride since becoming a formal part of Vital Communities in 2009. >>>>>



Clockwise from top:
The agenda for the Art and the Creative Economy session at AVA Gallery.

Participants listen to Hartford, Vt., first responders during the Government and Politics session.

Melissa Lewis, principal of the Disnard Elementary School, makes a point on Education Day along with other education leaders.

Participants meet Upper Valley health services organizations on Health and Human Services Day at Kendal.

Principal Frank Sprague waits for participants before leading the group on a tour of Stevens High School in Claremont, N.H.





Clockwise from top:
Place based educator, Steve Glazer (not pictured) teaches participants how to learn the history of a town exploring it's cemeteries.

Leadership Upper Valley Manager Stacey Glazer makes a point at a recent session.

AVA Gallery Executive Director Bente Torjusen discusses the transformation of the AVA building from a factory to an award winning LEED Gold Certified Art space.

Performers from Opera North's Young Artist program perform Mozart's *The Impresario* for Leadership participants during the Art and the Creative Economy session at AVA Gallery.



“Leadership Upper Valley has a growing reputation,” acknowledges Mary Margaret Sloan, executive director of Vital Communities. “More and more people are saying, ‘I want to look into that.’”

ON THE MOVE

With a small staff and large ambitions, program organizers rely heavily on dedicated volunteers to plan and deliver 10 issue-specific sessions which are the bread and butter offerings of The Leadership Institute. And given the accelerated pace at which The Leadership Institute is moving, interested parties might have to look quickly to follow the comings and goings of Institute participants.

On the second Wednesday of each month, from September through June, participants can be found anywhere and everywhere in the Upper Valley, learning from a “who’s who” of local professionals about the challenges and opportunities they encounter daily within their spheres of influence.

At Health and Human Services Day held at Kendal at Hanover in December, the lineup of presenters included executive directors of some of the Upper Valley’s best known nonprofits, plus the presidents or vice presidents of Granite United Way, Alice Peck Day and Dartmouth-Hitchcock.

In January it was on to the newly restored Wilder Center in Wilder, Vt., for a session on economic development. February: Off to the Center for Cartoon Studies in White River Junction, Vt., to concentrate on communications. And so it goes through graduation in June.

According to Doug Wise, current chair of the Board of Governors of Leadership Upper Valley, “Each session covers issues important to the region. Each session has a day planner who invites guest speakers (professionals in specific areas) and/or panelists to lead discussions.”

Leadership Upper Valley Manager Stacey Glazer adds, “We try to hold each session in different locations so that participants can learn not only about different topics, but also about different sections of the Upper Valley.”

MAKING CONNECTIONS

It is difficult to characterize Leadership Institute participants because they are such an eclectic lot. What they have in common, insists Wise, is passion. Plus, the desire and ability to “make things happen,” he says.

Scroll down the Class of 2013 list and you will be struck by their disparate job titles and work venues: Aquatic Center program director; project manager, Green Woodlands; volunteer coordinator, COVER Home Repair; member services supervisor, Hanover Co-op; executive director, Upper Valley Hostel; vice president, stewardship, the Upper Valley Land Trust; Town of Hartford Parks and Recreation director.

Some participants are recent returnees or transplants to the Upper Valley who view The Leadership Institute as a great networking or marketing opportunity. Others are attracted for personal and professional development reasons. And still others, including many who grew up here or have deep roots in the community, are anxious to break out of their daily routines to discover what the Upper Valley has to offer beyond the confines of their workplace.

All would agree with classmate Sherry Jones, marketing operations manager at Mascoma Savings Bank, that the program, if anything, has exceeded their expectations. “Professionally, it has given me more of an insight into the many volunteer opportunities that are available in the community,” says Jones. “Personally, it has opened my eyes to the importance of us all working together.”

And then there is serendipity, the accident of finding something good or useful while not specifically searching for it. Time and time again, Institute aficionados reference the unanticipated benefits of participation, both on a professional and personal level.

For Aquatic Center Program Director Catherine Pearson, it was the ability to use her Leadership class as an instant focus group to ascertain what time suits working people best for afternoon swim

lessons. Or absorbing, as she did at Education Day, “what some of [her kids] are going through on a daily basis in the classroom...and what some of their home lives are like.”

For Tad Nunez, longtime Town of Hartford Parks and Recreation director, it was the ability to connect his mother, an artist of 40 years, with the AVA Gallery.

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Having just spent “Art and the Creative Economy” day at AVA and having just moved his mother to a local nursing home, Nunez was able to put one and one together to make two. “She is now a member and will have a showing next spring,” he states proudly. “All because of my getting to know the folks at AVA!”

GIVING BACK

Making connections and giving back certainly are central tenets of The Leadership Institute. Attendees feel that — by virtue of going through The Leadership Institute — they are obliged to give something back in the form of service to the community at large and, ideally, to Leadership Upper Valley itself.

Repayment takes many forms from one-shot projects, such as helping to repaint the Upper Valley Hostel, to ongoing board or committee work for nonprofits, including Leadership Upper Valley. Many of the people who step forward to become Leadership Institute day planners or guest presenters actually are graduates.

One of Mary Margaret Sloan’s favorite examples of how The Leadership Institute can promote civic engagement involves a “small, but exciting museum” in Meriden, N.H., the Aidron Duckworth Art Museum, that contacted her and asked for help. “They said that >>>>

they had an aging board of trustees and wanted to find new leadership,” she says. “We reached out to our Leadership Upper Valley alumni and a candidate stepped up. The museum is thrilled and this alumnus has an opportunity to be civically involved in a way he might not otherwise have.”

BUY-IN FROM EMPLOYERS

It isn't difficult to see why participants are so enthused. But why are local employers so supportive of The Leadership Institute?

Hypertherm's Vice President of Human Resources Deane Ilukowicz speaks for many when she says, “From my perspective, we support this initiative for a number of reasons: to cultivate the ideal of good citizenship in leaders or those that have leadership potential; to expose leaders or those with leadership potential to different business sectors; and to provide networking opportunities and to support a community program.”

David Watts, a member of the class

of 2011 and director of human resources at Kendal, credits The Leadership Institute with “leapfrogging” both his own and his employer's involvement in the Upper Valley. The relationships Watts established with local nonprofits, through the institute, helped Kendal hit the ground running when they instituted paid time for staff to perform community service.

“What I see Leadership Upper Valley doing is sending out tentacles of interconnections between towns,” Watts says. “It helps to promote a regional viewpoint.”

GOING FORWARD

It is safe to say that many of the movers and shakers behind Leadership Upper Valley are positively bullish about the program's future.

“We're in a good place to make a big leap now,” says Sloan. “We're at that stage where we have enough history behind us to ask: How are we affecting civic engagement in our region? How are we making this a better place to live, work and play?”

Whether that “leap” takes the form of expanding offerings to alumni or introducing more “issue specific” leadership programs (like sustainability), anything is possible.

Wise adds, “There are a lot of good directions you can go. The program is in a healthy, constant state of morphing or evolving.”

Both principals recognize, however, that The Leadership Institute's success ultimately hinges on the ability to keep maintaining diversity in all forms — particularly economic. That is why 30 to 35 percent students in each class, on average, are provided with scholarship support to keep costs manageable, especially when employers aren't able or willing to pick up the \$1,275 per person tab.

Wise, who goes back practically to the beginning of the program, is quite sanguine about the future. As he tells it, “In a nine-inning game, we're probably still in the 3rd or 4th inning. The game may take 10 years.”

Given The Leadership Institute's growing popularity, many fans are hoping for an endless season. UVL

To Those Whom Much Is Given

On the surface, Leadership Institute graduates Pamela Pantos (Class of 2010) and Dorisann Ross (Class of 2012), would appear to have little in common. Pantos is a former opera singer who is now in her fifth year as the executive director of Opera North. Ross is vice president, northern regional manager for Lake Sunapee Bank. Pantos is a relative newcomer to the Upper Valley; Ross is a lifelong resident.

the opportunity — early in her tenure at Opera North — to be exposed to successful examples of companies “that could have gone anywhere and chose to expand their presence here. It was really quite liberating and inspiring,” she says.

So inspiring, in fact, that Pantos volunteered to become the “Art and the Creative Economy Day” planner for the 2012-13 version of The Leadership Institute.

For Ross, going through the program was an exercise in learning “how important each person and business is in the big puzzle of our community.” After sending a representative from the bank to the institute four years running, she decided to find out for herself what the buzz was all about. Once Ross discovered the joy and satisfaction of becoming a key piece of the puzzle herself, there was no stopping her.

In short order she enlisted Lake Sunapee Bank employees to volunteer to raise money for cancer by selling daffodils at DHMC; perform a Day of Caring for Granite United Way; and serve dinners at The Haven. “The list just keeps growing,” says Ross. “It truly is contagious.”

Admittedly, not all Leadership Institute graduates become as engaged as Pantos and Ross, but almost all come away with their expectations fulfilled and their desire for increased community service enhanced.

— Skip Sturman



Pamela Pantos and Dorisann Ross

When it comes to extolling the virtues of The Leadership Institute, however, the two are definitely kindred spirits. For Pantos, arriving as a “complete newbie” in October of 2008, The Leadership Institute was “the best thing that could have happened to me,” she says. “Not only did I get to meet a lot of cool people whom I may not have met otherwise, The Leadership Institute also broadened my horizons because people had such varying perspectives.”

As a transplant to the Upper Valley, Pantos especially appreciated