

Planting seeds, transforming communities

By Lisa Lopez Snyder, Contributing Writer

Paul Stoney recalls idle summer evenings as a teenager, sitting with his friends on the front steps of his childhood home in Queens, N.Y.

“Fortunately, I was able to stay clear of trouble,” he says, of a neighborhood where crime and run-ins with the police were not uncommon for young men like him. “But for a few twists of fate, I could very well have been on the other side of the law.”

Today, as executive director of the Charleston YMCA, Stoney is as far from idle. He’s not only a community leader, but he is working with colleagues from the business, law enforcement, nonprofit and the faith community sectors on a new program aimed at helping a new generation of inner city youth in low-income communities around Charleston avoid the same perils he faced as a child.

The program: Camp Hope, a free, five-week summer evening camp for 50 high-risk and high-potential children ages 7 to 12. The program, which operates 6 p.m. to 9 p.m., five nights a week, keeps neighborhood children safe, active and learning with activities that include swimming and tennis lessons, recreational games, field trips and a host of educational and health events.

Now in its second year, and thanks to in-kind donations including time, space and expertise from 24 agencies, Camp Hope is not only creating a positive environment for at-risk children, but is getting top business, community and policy decision makers to learn that by using their collective diverse perspectives and talents, they can create better communities and eventually, an improved economic picture for all South Carolinians.

Creating conditions to transform communities

Camp Hope is a “capstone” project of the Diversity Leaders Initiative, a program



Paul Stoney, of the Charleston YMCA, rides through the Charleston Harbor with children participating in Camp Hope. The camp was created as a result of the Diversity Leaders Initiative, a program the Riley Institute at Furman University runs to encourage community leaders to improve their communities. (Photo/Natalie Todd)

of the Riley Institute at Furman University. Established in 2003, DLI is a classroom and hands-on program that challenges public and private sector leaders throughout South Carolina to roll up their sleeves and work together to create and carry out a tangible project that improves their communities. DLI participants, who are nominated for the program, include corporate CEOs, nonprofit leaders, government and school officials, legislators, faith leaders, chamber of commerce directors and community leaders from across the state. They meet four times a month for five months.

During that time, they are grouped by their region — Upstate, Midlands and Lowcountry — and are charged with developing a capstone project, an outreach effort to solve a problem or concern in their community. They also give themselves a name for their group.

The DLI approach has Donald L. Gordon, executive director of the Riley Institute,

excited because it creates an environment for people from diverse regions, demographic and familial backgrounds and organizational structures, to work together to create and carry out civic, diversity-oriented projects, which he says, is the way to have real impact on quality of life for all South Carolinians.

“If we’re going to be competitive economically in the United States in a time of a global economy, we need all of our people [in the state],” Gordon says. “If we’re not doing the things that bring all our people together to rev up the economic engine in this state, we are simply going to go backwards and the quality of life will go down.”

“These (DLI) individuals are dedicated to doing common sense, practical and inclusive things to make life better for everybody and to create conditions for us to be economically competitive in the new global 21st century,” Gordon says. “It’s a rapidly changing state and we all have something to give.”

Calder Ehrmann, a retired Michelin executive much recognized for leading the company's diversity efforts years before others started to do so, agrees. "We cannot afford as a state or as a nation to try and compete on a global basis without involving everybody being engaged in the process," he says. Now a senior associate of the Riley Institute at Furman, Ehrmann adds, "We've got to have access to people's talents and abilities in order to be successful over time. It's just that simple."

Gordon says that what distinguishes the DLI training is that "it goes way beyond sensitivity training," in terms of race, ethnicity and gender. In sessions, participants learn how to be aware of the diverse perspectives that exist in their world — not just in racial, ethnic and gender terms, but by all the factors that may distinguish individuals from one another — whether it's family background or other social aspects. They also learn how to manage diverse groups of people in their own organizations and how to create partnerships with their peers in competing companies or organizations from across the state.

Encouraging the next generation

Camp Hope was the brainchild of DLI's Lowcountry group, Mozaik, which included leaders from organizations such as the Charleston Police Department, First Citizens Bank, Charleston City Council, Setcom Media (former publisher of SCBIZ magazine), Spoleto USA and Trident Technical College.

Stoney credits Charleston Police Chief Gregory Mullen for suggesting the idea, and the entire team for making it happen. He also credits Charleston Mayor Joseph P. Riley Jr. and the city of Charleston for providing resources that keep the program going.

"Chief Mullen had this (idea) on his mind for a long time," Stoney says. "Summertime is when children have the most amount of daylight and the least amount of positive activities," he adds. "Now, we have those children doing activities they wouldn't normally be exposed to." For example, the Camp Hope youth recently took a cruise around Charleston Harbor that Mozaik hosted. "Many of these children live on the peninsula, but most have never been on a boat," Stoney says.

Understanding differences

One of the Midlands DLI groups, Nine 4 Youth — named after the nine-member group — identified gang prevention and school violence as a major concern.

"[Our group members] had been hearing constantly about gangs," says group member Jill Davis, vice president of corporate planning and strategic services of BlueCross BlueShield of South Carolina. "We figured we could use this as a tool to propel youth toward greater achievement."

Nine 4 Youth decided to carry out Challenge Day, a nationally known program that helps young people break down barriers and helps every child feel safe, loved and celebrated. The initiative involves a powerful, day-long assembly in which 100 teens and 25 adult facilitators, who lead small groups, are guided through games, discussions and exercises that reveal hidden stereotypes. The program also brings out the social isolation that young people often feel. The group worked with three Midland high schools — Columbia, Dreher and Dutch Fork.

Nine 4 Youth members recruited community leaders to serve as the adult facilitators. "Often you have policy makers in their offices



Sue Schneider (left) and Curtis Johnson (right) present the community action project created in their DLI course. Phyllis Martin (center) is also a DLI graduate.

who think of ways to achieve educational achievement and that's great," Davis says, "but there's a lot going on in the schools that the policy makers aren't necessarily aware of.

"You get change makers involved," she says, "and over time things can start to change."

The group sent letters to 100 select individuals who they believed would have an impact on public education. Twenty adults participated, led by two trained facilitators from the national Challenge Day office.

Elliott Epps, executive director of City Year Columbia, a non-profit that provides young people with full-time community service opportunities in some of the city's most under-resourced schools, says the result was powerful.

"Some of the things these young people were saying would rip your heart out," he says. "It is amazing to think that these young

people overcome the odds they face and they still learn." The program was equally powerful for the teachers, principles and other adult facilitators, he says. "For these people it was a reminder why they are in these jobs. We celebrate what they are doing."

Inclusion in the Upstate

Diane Eldridge, chair of the Greenville Chamber of Commerce Leadership Development Board of Regents, and a longtime community volunteer, served on the Upstate's Inclusion Infusion group, which created an awards dinner in 2004 to recognize individual and organizational "champions of diversity." The Riley Institute quickly adopted the idea and now the Anderson, Greenville and Spartanburg chambers of commerce — all of which have had representatives complete the DLI program — take turns hosting the dinner. Award winners are recognized as role models in promoting diversity in the areas of business, individual leadership, community building, schools and civic organizations.

Rotating the dinner among the three chambers was in and of itself an accomplishment, Eldridge says. "While [the chambers] had worked together on some things, they had never collaborated on something that big, and there was long time competition," she says. "We were able to break down those barriers." The dinner, now in its fourth year, attracted more than 600 people in May this year.

Looking ahead: SC Tomorrow

Participants have all taken what they've learned to their offices. Epps has his youth staff go through the Challenge Day training; Davis shared the information with her colleagues and said it also sensitized her in her daily work routine. Eldridge says the awards dinner continues to attract individuals from across the state.

Since its launch, the initiative has trained and graduated more than 400 individuals. Gordon notes the institute plans to hold a new program next year: SC Tomorrow, a two-day program for 48 DLI graduates — 16 from each of the three regions of the state — in which they'll hammer out ideas and models for various issues facing the state, for example, the state's transportation system.

"When you create conditions for leaders to go through this program," Gordon says, "you have better leverage in terms of spreading the ability of people to be able to be a part of the greater structure of an organization or the state." ■