

# Riley Institute at Furman marks 10 years of progress

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(Photo: PATRICK COLLARD/Staff)

The Diversity Leaders Initiative (DLI) at Furman University's Riley Institute isn't just a program of talk, its facilitator says.

It's a program of action, according to Juan Johnson, who is the program's designer, as well as facilitator.

Some of the action born from the program have been captured in a new magazine entitled "*UNITE South Carolina*."

The magazine was unveiled Monday during a special ceremony at Michelin North America in honor of DLI's 10 years. It highlights 10 of DLI's "most outstanding" community projects across the state, including the Upstate, with photos and stories by Jean Shifrin, an Atlanta-based photographer and former newspaper photojournalist.

There have been 135 action projects in DLI's 10 years, said Johnson, but only 10 were chosen to celebrate 10 years.

When people read the magazine, Johnson hopes the takeaway will be that "people can make a difference in this state, people can change lives in this state."

Furman political science professor Don Gordon, former Furman President David Shi, and former U.S. Secretary of Education and South Carolina Gov. Richard "Dick" Riley saw a need for the DLI program when they launched the Riley Institute 15 years ago.

Over a five-month period, which includes five full program days, participants in DLI work in small groups to identify, analyze and develop solutions for community issues, Furman University said in a release.

Dream Connectors, Momentum Bike Clubs, and Good Eats are Upstate projects highlighted in *UNITE South Carolina* that grew out of the DLI.

DLI is really a program about community building, Johnson said

Riley, one of the speakers at Monday's celebration, said DLI is the biggest program at The Riley Institute and "it's one, I think, that's having the most impact on the state and people in the state."

Riley said DLI pulls in a very diverse group of people in a leadership capacity. They work together in a systematic way to show that working together, understanding each other, and listening to each other really works well, he said.

"It works well in business, it works well if you're on the hospital board, county council or whatever," Riley said. "Frankly, that's what South Carolina really needs to move forward."

More than 1,300 leaders have gone through the DLI in its 10 years.

"The leaders that have come through didn't just come into a room and talk for five days. They really got engaged in community," Johnson said.

He said those leaders are "trying to build brighter futures for our kids, so they are learning about diversity."

"Everybody who comes out of there says it has changed their lives. They are really ready to go out and be good, positive-thinking citizens trying to work together with everybody," Riley said.

Pete Selleck, chairman and president of Michelin North America, a graduate of DLI, said 96 of his company's managers have also gone through the DLI course and "in the next class, we'll get to 100."

During the course, Selleck said, "We're put together with people that we ordinarily would not get to meet. We're allowed through that process to have conversations that many of us have never had before.

"We learn to understand the complexity of diversity, and we understand how to make progress through that."

That has made a difference at Michelin North America, Selleck said.

“When we talk about respect for people, which is one of our core values, we know that diversity is an important part of understanding how people do interact,” Selleck said.

“It’s important to recognize that every person has potential, every person has ambition, every person has capability.”

The DLI currently has three programs -- one in the Upstate, one in the Midlands and one in the Lowcountry, Johnson said.

He said he wants to take the program statewide.

Many employers in the state have said it’s sometimes a challenge to recruit talent because of some of the images around South Carolina, Johnson said.

The Diversity Consortium, which Johnson writes about in *UNITE South Carolina*, is an example of a statewide program, he said. It brings organizations together to support each other in their recruitment efforts.

“I think, going forward, we’re going to look for more opportunities to do things to bring the three regions of the state together as opposed to operating in compartmentalized sections of the state,” Johnson said.

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For more on UNITE or the Diversity Leaders Initiative, call the Institute at 864-294-3253.

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