

Dreaming with the Fishes

“Dreamnight at the Aquarium” was the brainchild of the South Carolina Aquarium and DLI group 2 from the Lowcountry DLI Fall 2014 class. As our group of eleven members came together, we were looking for an opportunity that would touch unserved groups in the community but also had the possibility of being sustainable. Being made up of folks from the Charleston area, but also individuals from Orangeburg and Beaufort, our challenge was to find a project that spoke to group members from different communities and also was possible for as many members of our group to participate in.

Our group, being of a diverse makeup, had diverse ideas of what the project should look like. We talked about the disabled community, having a member who professionally interacted with this population and also was on a board that served these folks. We talked about a tie-in with the Charleston Housing Authority, using another member’s place of work as a launching pad. Others touched base with schools serving a vulnerable population of kids and community agencies who worked with children and their families for opportunities that might be available.

Our group was fortunate to have the head of the South Carolina Aquarium as a member which gave us another opportunity to consider which might speak to the sustainable piece. Kevin Mills, leading the South Carolina Aquarium, spoke about a project they had considered being a part of which had taken place at other aquariums and zoos around the world. The events had been created around populations that might not have access to these amazing resources where the zoos and aquariums provided a night of fun and learning in their respective sites. Successful in other cities, the South Carolina Aquarium had been looking into the possibility of doing a special night as well.

The opportunity to partner with the South Carolina Aquarium seemed to be the best option for the group. Giving our DLI group an established group to work with that already had a framework for an event allowed us to pursue next steps. While the Aquarium staff had their ideas of what the night would consist of, the DLI group was challenged to find sponsors and be a part of the planning for the night. Locking into an idea the latter part of October, we started meeting with the Aquarium staff at the end of 2014. Our group presented our idea to the collective Lowcountry DLI group on our last meeting date in December. Wanting to give a visual of what the children and their families would be able to experience that night, an Aquarium staff member brought a snake for all to touch.

After the DLI course ended, the challenge was keeping the group together to meet and share responsibilities. John Read took on the sponsorship piece and was able to bring MUSC Children’s Hospital in as the lead sponsor. Their participation created the link we were looking for when it came to determining the population who would be included on this special night. MUSC Children’s Hospital determined they wanted to include the children with Sickle Cell Disease and their families for this first-time event. The hospital worked with the Sickle Cell Clinic to identify the families to be included and invitations went out.

In the meantime, other sponsors were signed on and the work to coordinate an event and make it something special was taking place. The Aquarium staff took the food and drink donations that were secured and then added catering to the event. Fun shark bags were filled with a wonderfully colorful t-shirt with MUSC Children's Hospital and the South Carolina Aquarium logos on front along with whimsical sea life. Proudly displayed the back of the shirt were the additional sponsors. Children were excited to find treats in their bags and know they had something special to take home.

Perfect weather was in place the evening of the event. With a timeframe of 6 pm to 9 pm and staggered times on tickets, families came via golf cart shuttles after parking for free in the Aquarium garage. Children were excited to receive their bags and t-shirts and went on to have a family picture taken that they would pick up later that evening. Turtles and alligators and snakes were all around the Aquarium on the arms of staff and the squeals of brave children were heard all over the facility. Taking in the sites with their families, many of whom said they had never visited before, was a treat. The meal of sliders and mac and cheese and a free IMAX movie next door kept all there fulfilled.

The event included about 250 people, probably a good number for the first-time event. The population of children included were ambulatory and did not have dietary needs so it made for a pretty simple operation. Having the amazing staff of the South Carolina Aquarium embrace the families was wonderful to see and people left feeling very taken care of and appreciative. When we followed up with the Sickle Cell Staff, they said the families could not stop talking about the evening. Many said it was the first time there had been an event that targeted the Sickle Cell population and many wanted to know if they would have the chance to come back next year. What could be a better sign of a successful event! Thanks to the South Carolina Aquarium and MUSC Children's Hospital and the other wonderful sponsors who participated, DLI Group 2 was able to say their Capstone Project went swimmingly!