

Leadership Howard County in 30th year of nurturing leaders

BY JANENE HOLZBERG

PHOTOS BY NATE PESCE

In 1985, Columbia had just turned 18 and was still evolving.

After Columbia founder James Rouse brought his vision to Howard County in 1967, people drawn by the promises of racial inclusion and socio-economic diversity were continuing to move to the planned city to live or work.

Could we, wondered the Howard County Chamber of Commerce, set up an organization to help incoming business leaders match their individual interests to the burgeoning needs of the county to affect change for the greater good?

To explore that question, the Chamber turned to Richard Talkin, a noted land use attorney who had opened his offices in Columbia in 1968 and who had many connections.

"The idea was to take people who were already leaders in their companies and let them understand the needs of the county," Talkin said.

Chamber leaders like Patrick McCuan, a noted businessman and real estate developer, were inspired by a similar program launched by the Greater Baltimore Committee the previous year, he said.

"When you finished the course, you would have met other executives and CEOs to create a network to participate in the philanthropic community," he explained.

Thirty years later Leadership Howard County has sustained the chamber's vision by putting more than 1,150 "students" through their paces in Leadership Premier, the nonprofit organization's original 10-month course, and two other programs have been added.

Since 1996, 715 students have graduated from Leadership U, which is aimed at rising high school juniors. Leadership Essentials, a class for young professionals with emerging leadership skills that is now run with Loyola University Maryland, has graduated 158 people since 2008.

These graduates have volunteered nearly 75,000 hours, organizers say. At an average rate of \$25 an hour, their community service hours represent an investment of nearly \$1.9 million that the county wouldn't have received otherwise, according to independent research done for LHC.

"The proof of the success of Leadership Howard County is in the pudding," Talkin said, recalling that Caleb Gould and the late Louis Mangione, both prominent local developers, were members of the first LHC class.

"There has been a cross-fertilization of ideas since then as well as an increase in involvement," he said. "There are lots of people doing things for the community behind the scenes that most people don't know are happening."

Stacie Hunt, who completed the course as a United Way manager in 2002 and then took LHC's reins later the same year as president and CEO, said she is constantly amazed by the commitment of graduates.

"Watching the members of each class become aware of the interconnectivity of county organizations and then go on to make important contributions above and beyond their day jobs is energizing."

"I've asked myself, 'Is every community like this or are we a county filled with overachievers?'" Hunt said.

One of the main missions of LHC — which is funded by sponsors' contributions, tuition fees and alumni dues — is to teach class members to consider the big picture.

"One of the big things Leadership Howard County focuses on is what we can do beyond helping ourselves," she said. "If you hear about something that's happening and you're going, 'That's not right,' then that flips a switch for you and you get involved in that and it becomes your passion."

"Howard County is small enough that it's not hard to learn about," Hunt said. "Our purpose is to get more people to see that what happens elsewhere impacts the county — we don't have a moat separating us."

One recent example of an organization where an LHC graduate made a difference is NeighborRide, Hunt said, a supplemental transportation service for county seniors.

The organization had been confronted with a wave of retirement-aged drivers transitioning from their volunteer posts to become service users, diminishing their ranks. It is now working to expand its pool of potential drivers by recruiting from county businesses.

Hunt stressed that while Columbia plays a big role in the economy of the county — and its establishment created a migration of highly educated and intellectual people that might not otherwise have occurred — LHC is conscious of its role in considering the particular needs of all county communities.

"We're a small county, but we're not homogenous," she said.

Shirley Burrill, who became LHC's first



From left, Omarl Russell, on tenor sax, Adam Rooner, on guitar, and Tim Jessilonis, on standup bass, play jazz during the opening reception at Ten Oaks Ballroom.

executive director in 1985 and served in that post until 2002, echoed that sentiment.

"Each year's class represents a diverse group of people who have excellent leadership qualities and are committed to helping their fellow man," Burrill said. "By helping the participants to understand how they can effect positive change in our county, the result is a stronger, more vibrant, nurturing community."

Hunt noted that, beyond being a proven leader, applicants must live or work in the county.

Graduates on board

One person who exemplifies why non-residents who work in the county are included in the program is Richard Story, a Reisterstown resident and former CEO of the Howard County Economic Development Authority.

"He may not sleep here, but he acts like a county citizen," Hunt said about the 1995 LHC graduate who continues his involvement.

Story, now a senior vice president with Howard Bank, said the proof of LHC's success after three decades "is the fact that nearly all nonprofit organizations and county government departments have LHC graduates on board."

The organization's founders had projected a finite life span for the organization due to a perceived dearth of leaders to populate the course year after year, Story said.

Those early fears were obviously unfounded; this year's class of 49 leaders graduated June 9 at Ten Oaks Ballroom in Clarksville.

Renee Foose, county public schools superintendent and member of the class of 2014, says the course's impact filters down to county families.

"Many of our students and families face overwhelming hurdles, which require the combined efforts of many in our community to overcome," Foose said.

"Leadership Howard County gives participants broad insight into community needs and available services. It fosters strong connections among service providers that lead to solutions that really work."

Having community leaders spend 10 months together united in purpose brings dividends, said another graduate in Foose's class.

"Leadership Howard County had a huge impact on my preparation for serving on the County Council," said Jon Weinstein, a Democrat who won his District 1 seat in November. "Even though I have been quite involved in the community since moving here nearly 20 years

ago, LHC provided a platform to go into significant depth on a wide array of subjects.

"The direct result is a large cadre of leaders that are willing to work together to resolve problems facing our county or implement new programs to serve the community," he said.

As one measure of the continuing commitment of graduates, businesses and nonprofits, the goal of raising \$600,000 in order to increase LHC's scholarship fund to \$1 million by June 30, 2016, in honor of the organization's 30th anniversary year, is on target, said Story, who is leading LHC's endowment campaign.

This will allow LHC to fulfill more requests for financial assistance to cover the tuition of \$5,100 and to ensure inclusion of participants from diverse backgrounds and from small businesses, Hunt explained.

"While Leadership Howard County may have a basic formula, graduates are not steered in any one direction, Hunt said, and the organization is constantly working to evolve to meet the community's needs 10 years in the future.

"There's no right or wrong place to be as a Leadership Howard County graduate, and we don't want to prescribe what you do or how you do it," she said. "We just want to see everybody take their place."