

Where Bergen Grows Better

Are leaders born or made? Did you ever air that question out in the classroom or in the living room? Did you ever take a Human Motivation and Behavior class, because such questions are always fodder for discussion there? Is the aptitude one has to lead intrinsic or is it taught to them? Of course, parents and teachers and friends and acquaintances and experience itself shape what one becomes—shape the outcomes of our strivings and contrivings. We are, all of us, steeled and nurtured by all that we encounter.

Every day, every person, every experience is a classroom.

But in the end, in what we are and in what we do and in what we achieve, is it ours by reason of birth --- was it always in us, or was it rather passed on down to us? Did Abraham Lincoln and Teddy Roosevelt and Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi and Barack Obama always have it or was it given to them? Who knows? And ultimately, you have to wonder if this question even matters?

Then again, maybe it's just a bogus question to do begin with. For the truth is that leaders both have it and nurture it. They have it, yet shape it, hone it, refine it, improve it with each and every passing experience.

In New Jersey, there's an organization, *Leadership New Jersey* that brings together about 40 people each year, from a diverse cross-section of public, private, academic, and community enterprises. They are immersed monthly in intensive two day seminars on a cross-section of critical issues confronting the State, from education to health care, to transportation, to law and public safety, to environment, to human services, and so on. Issues are articulated, engaged, and debated in intense settings. Always the 40, sometimes broken down into teams and groups, but

BERGEN LEADS

WHERE BERGEN COUNTY'S
FUTURE BEGINS



From left to right: Tony Luciano, Quest Diagnostics; JoAnn Mathews, Most Blessed Sacrament School (and resident of Carlstadt); Liz Corsini, Bergen Family Center.

always the 40, who come to know each other and to walk around in each other's moccasins some. In the end, it is the hope of the organizers that each of the 55 will maintain a keen interest in some of these critical issues and find their own path to impacting and changing New Jersey for the better in years to come. It is further hoped that they will take advantage of the network of the 40 that has been given them so that they also might find some path to work together. It is hoped that while in their own spheres, they also might serve others in theirs, with a steady eye on the advancement of the good of the whole.

Well, it so happened, naturally, that a number of active Bergen County residents, leaders of a kind to be sure, who participated in Leadership New Jersey, returned to Bergen and asked, "Why not here?" Why not emulate what Leadership New Jersey does on the State level in Bergen

County? Why not immerse prospective or established leaders in this County in a cross-section of critical issues confronting Bergen? Why not build leadership networks here? Why not better activate and acclimate people to collective problems and challenges? Why not nurture advocates who might look to effect change and to make differences for the better? Why not a **Bergen LEADS**?

The story has it that the marketing director from Cole Schotz law firm in Hackensack and a staffer from the Volunteer Center for Bergen County had the initial conversation about this that got the formative juices flowing. So

Alan Levine and Amanda Missey and others decided to push the envelope on the idea. Discussions proceeded with the executive director and board members of the Volunteer Center and established county leaders like William "Pat" Schuber who had already served two terms as a County Executive. From January of 2007 through January of 2008, the board of the Volunteer Center discussed and eventually advanced a

strategic plan for a *Bergen LEADS*. There were two primary concerns, the first that it truly be aimed at nurturing and fashioning leadership skills and the second, and maybe even the primary of the two, that it be targeted at advancing the interests of community based organizations throughout the County. In blessing a program, the clear intent of the leaders of the Volunteer Center was that it be directly focused upon generating a new or expanded leadership to contribute to the myriad missions of established community organizations. So while it would educate and it would fashion, the ultimate goal of its founders was that it serve.

A distinguished board of advisors to fashion both the program and to better articulate the mission was established. Serving on it were Lynne Algrant—today's LEADS Leadership Consultant,

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Debbie Aronson and Janet Sharma of the Volunteer Center, the presidents of both Ramapo and Bergen Community Colleges—Peter Mercer and Jeremiah Ryan, Frank Scandale of The Record, Hector Banegas of Wachovia Wealth Management, Ellen Jacobs of the National Council of Jewish Women, Alan Levine of Cole Schotz, the Reverend Wanda Lundy of Church on the Edge, Susan Russ of Reader's Digest, Richard Segall of the Englewood Public Schools, Norman Seiden—philanthropist, and, of course William "Pat" Schuber—the former county executive. Indeed a formidable leadership team, people who had long delivered service in the interest of a better Bergen, put their imprimatur on the strategic plan for *Bergen LEADS*.

That plan was adopted by both the board of advisors and the board of the Volunteer Center that would administrate the program in January of 2008. Born in January of 2008, they had half a year in which to prepare for the first class of Bergen LEADS which came together in September of 2008. "It has been and remains a great labor of love for all of us at the Volunteer Center," said Amanda Missey, Bergen LEADS director. "Everyone involved, literally everyone, from Tom Toronto at Bergen County's United Way to Pat Schuber to our executive director has poured their very heart and soul into this effort. The class, the advisors, the individual program participants—everyone—is getting a lot out of it and I really believe, are finding joy in it. Whenever you tackle work that has purpose and meaning in it, work that is going to make a difference, you can't help but find a measure of joy in it."

So it began with an Opening Retreat in September and the group has already intensively focused upon county government and the non-profit/community organization sector in the county and health and hospitals and education. There also will be sessions on diversity and law and public safety and open space and the environment. While they open and close at major hotels in the county, like the Park Ridge Marriot, most of the monthly sessions are conducted courtesy of Bergen Community College in Paramus. "Our opening and closing retreats extend to two days," said Missey, "but our regular

monthly sessions usually run just a day." Pat Schuber has kindly stepped in to serve as the regular moderator of each session. "He is doing a phenomenal job for us," said Missey. "We are fortunate to be able to tap the vast reservoir of knowledge that he has about these issues. As county executive, there was no issue, no challenge, no cause, and no problem that didn't come to his attention. He is just perfect in this role, a role that he very much seems to enjoy."

They began, explained Missey, with a class of 30 that has dropped to 28. It is a class that represents the diversity of peoples and enterprises and interests that make Bergen County, the most populated county in the State, so unique. Bergen County, seventy municipalities and literally hundreds of community based organizations strong, is on the one hand uniquely affluent and on the other one that bears harsh witness to all of the social and human concerns known to mankind. Both the princes and the paupers are in its province.

So the class is comprised of business leaders, lawyers and bankers, ministers and school principals, both private and public—of hospital administrators and accountants and executives from United Water and Public Service Electric & Gas, the major utilities, and Quest Diagnostics, a major employer and representatives of housing and family and youth advocacies. Like their counterparts in Leadership New Jersey, they engage the issues together and they argue with each other and they break bread together. "The return on our investment here," said Missey, "is immediate because their personal commitment and involvement in community based organizations escalates. Right before our eyes, it escalates. In a sense what we do is tangible, hands on, right there in our ready grasp. They don't have to wait to graduate from the program to become more involved."

So the goal of enhancing contribution to organizations and of providing a fresh and new leadership for community based enterprises is already, in mid-stream of the first *Bergen LEADS* class, being realized. This outcome, sought by the Volunteer Center in fostering *Bergen LEADS*, is being fulfilled. "*Bergen LEADS* is a natural for Bergen County," said Missey. "You invite good people in, you engage

their minds and introduce challenges and causes and opportunities and they buy in. The line advances."

At present, open houses are regularly being conducted as they go about recruiting the second class of 2010. With an April 2nd deadline for applications, they are marketing through a broad county-wide network to invite as many candidates as possible. In fact anyone working or living in Bergen who has interest need only contact the Volunteer Center of Bergen County for information on applying. Of course, it is also available on the bergenleads.org website. Tuition is charged, but with a budget roughly \$130,000, it raises somewhere between 1/3 to 1/2 of what the program actually costs. Generous and concerned Bergen County corporations and organizations have stepped in to front the balance. At least 1/3 of the current class has been provided with scholarships and it is anticipated that scholarships for a portion of each class will continue to be warranted going forward.

"What's not to like about *Bergen LEADS*," concluded Missey. "In the end, it is all about involvement and engagement. There's great meaning in it and because there is, there also is great joy. *Bergen LEADS* just shakes things up."

Missey herself, originally a world away in Tulsa, Oklahoma, met the man she was to marry at the New Mexico State University. His civil engineering background brought them to New Jersey and she brought her community organizing skills to the Volunteer Center where she has been working with non-profits on development and training. Residing in the Fairmount section of Hackensack, she celebrates both community and *Bergen LEADS* which is joyfully on her plate.

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