



Nathan Webster speaks during a meeting of Leadership Clark County.

PHOTO BY JANE L. MATHEWS FOR THE COLUMBIAN

LEADING CLARK COUNTY

LOCAL NONPROFIT OFFERS CLASS THAT CREATES EFFECTIVE LEADERS FOR VANCOUVER AND BEYOND

Written by *Cami Joner*
Columbian staff writer

Whether one leads through stirring oration or by quiet example, it's been said the most effective leaders are the ones who best understand their community's needs. And that is one of the founding philosophies of Leadership Clark County, a course launched in 1993 "to provide an opportunity for citizens to gain community knowledge and leadership skills that will enable them to be more effective in their community involvement."

The statement, posted on the nonprofit's Web site, embodies the purpose of Leadership Clark County (LCC), which this month will graduate its 15th class of students who are completing a 10-month course that covers

everything from the area's transportation needs to its businesses and nonprofit agencies. Participants say they sign on for two reasons; to gain public knowledge of the county and become more active in community government and local nonprofits. So far, 431 students have completed the LCC course, alumni that include a state senator, a county commissioner and several members of Vancouver's city council.

But the list of elected officials isn't the only measurement of the program's success, according to Craig Pridemore, a state senator from Vancouver and one of LCC's earliest graduates. "Leadership Clark County



Kathryn Scott, executive director of Leadership Clark County.

wasn't formed just to develop elected officials — it was formed to develop leadership throughout the community and even within existing organizations and businesses," he said, calling the program one that extends beyond the role of training ground for political leaders. "Virtually every meeting I attend these days I can look around and see any number of LCC graduates leading the discussion," Pridemore said.



Marsha Fraser of Olympia, president of solutions@work, "organizational consulting & training," leads a session on change management.

of decision-making that is commonplace in government, said Jon Yamashita, a 2003 graduate of LCC and president of the nonprofit's 18-member board. "What really makes people become good leaders is the understanding that issues don't exist in silos," he said.

Groups of between five and six students are expected to come up with a group project during the latter months of the course. Projects must be designed to benefit the community, according to Scott. "They get to choose their project from six broad, overreaching categories," Scott said, although LCC fields requests for projects from many organizations throughout the community and passes the proposals along to the students.

Making the grade

LCC candidates must apply for the program with at least two letters of referral and \$2,500 in nonrefundable tuition and application fees, according to the program's online application. Candidates are also asked for a one-page personal statement and a resume of their employment, education and community activities. Each applicant is then put through an interview process with the LCC board, "to get to know them and assess their communication styles," Yamashita said. "I wouldn't say we don't

want a bad apple, but communication styles are very important to us."

Candidates also take a personality test to further assess their qualifications, Scott said. And while she said the program isn't designed to turn applicants away, "We have had more applications than space, so it certainly factors into how we fill the class. The point of the test is to learn about yourself and how you get along with people." Once the group is assembled, participants may be purposely grouped in diverse fashion, Scott said.

Networking alum

Ask any alum about their particular experience, and most will say they came away from LCC with friendships that might never have formed without the program. "As you go through your profession, they are people you can call on for their area of expertise," Yamashita said.

"People still get together on community projects after being out of the program for years," said Elson Strahan, who served as chairman of the LCC board from 2002 to 2004. Strahan, who is also president of the nonprofit Vancouver National Historic Reserve Trust, said his organization pays the LCC tuition to each recipient of the trust's annual Marshall Public Leadership Award. "The award recognizes young emerging

"It was an opportunity to meet a big group of people who are like-minded in their efforts to get involved in serving this community,"

- Greg McGreevey

Crash course

LCC sessions kick off in September with between 35 and 36 students who meet for one full day a month during the course of the program, said Kathryn Scott, LCC's part-time executive director. A typical all-day session might start with a panel of local health-care experts who will finish up their presentation with a hypothetical case study, asking students to split into groups and come up with a solution to a health-care issue.

Working with a diverse base of classmates helps participants get a feel for the kinds

leaders in our community, so it dovetails very nicely with LCC," he said.

As the 2007 Marshall Award recipient, Greg McGreevey called his LCC experience "invaluable. It was an opportunity to meet a big group of people who are like-minded in their efforts to get involved in serving this community," said McGreevey, who culminated the LCC experience as part of a group that created a nonprofit agency.

Measuring success

McGreevey and his group partnered with Clark County government to create Janus of SW Washington, a nonprofit entity that operates through a sheltered club house that helps recovering mental health patients find jobs. "I learned a lot about mental health issues and the way people struggle," McGreevey said. The \$1.4 million project is one among several Scott called "amazing" examples of the LCC program's success.

But not all group projects succeed in the same sense, said Yamashita, who said failed projects can be a different way to measure the program's achievements. "Our point of the project is not to get five or six stellar

projects, but to get people to learn how to work effectively in groups. As a member of a team, you don't learn a lot when everything goes your way," Yamashita said.

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- Jon Yamashita

Leadership lessons

Even the initial leaders of LCC say they've learned some hard lessons since the program's inception. "I can tell you it hasn't always been a bed of roses," said Brian Wolfe, a local attorney and a Port of Vancouver commissioner. As an early member of the LCC board, Wolfe said the nonprofit

program came very close to financial failure in its first few years. "We spent more than we had," he said. At the time, an infusion of cash from the Greater Vancouver Chamber of Commerce kept the LCC program afloat, Wolfe said.

Today, LCC leaders say the program is financed by a combination of tuition and business sponsorships. Local public agencies help out by offering speakers, equipment and the use of public facilities for the program's monthly meetings. "We have very broad-based community support," Scott said, including businesses that offer scholarships to support the leadership program.

Founded when Clark County was on the cusp of a major population growth boom, Leadership Clark County was born from a need to build a new generation of leaders, according to Bruce Hagensen, who served as Vancouver Mayor from 1987 to 1995, during the inception of LCC. "There were a number of things that needed to be done and all the same people were showing up at all of the meetings," said Hagensen, adding that the small pool of leaders faced the real risk of burnout.

While Hagensen said it is difficult to measure whether LCC has succeeded in replacing those early leaders, he believes the program will at least continue to churn out a new crop of prospects each year. And that is perhaps more important, Hagensen said. "People can only keep up a certain pace for so long and then they have to step back and let someone else step in. The most amazing thing about our community is we've managed to keep up the pace." ●

Leadership Clark County

- **What:** A 10-month-long community leadership program focused on knowledge of the community, including its history, local businesses, governments and nonprofits.
- **Offices:** 400 E. Evergreen Blvd.
- **Executive Director:** Kathryn Scott
- **Founded:** 1993
- **Annual operating budget:** \$109,000
- **Number of graduates:** 431
- **Tuition:** \$2,500

To find out more or to sign up:
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www.leadershipclarkcounty.com



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