High impact giving: The MENTOR Network Leadership Fellows Program

State budget cuts wreak havoc on providers struggling to maintain quality services. A CEO’s retirement endangers one organization’s strategic vision. A failure to collect and analyze data breeds misinformation and misunderstanding in another.

While July’s hot sun beckoned many to beaches and lakes, the latest class of MENTOR Network Leadership Fellows gathered instead at the University of Delaware to tackle these and other serious challenges facing human services organizations. Five MENTOR Fellows joined 25 other emerging leaders in a week-long intensive institute organized by the National Leadership Consortium on Developmental Disabilities. Participants had the chance to learn from national experts, develop leadership and management skills, and expand their network of professional contacts.

Created in 2008, The Fellows Program is the Foundation’s response to the oncoming leadership crisis in the field of human services. Retirements far outpace senior management recruitment, training and retention. To help nurture future leaders, the Foundation funds full tuition for the Institute, travel costs and expenses of up to five Fellows each year. In 2009, MENTOR Fellows represented a range of organizations from Maryland, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Mexico and Washington.

“The Leadership Institute was an awesome experience that allowed me to stretch and grow. Thank you for this gift. It will be used well.”

~Tami LaDoux, Tri-Cities Residential Services, Washington

As a result, they are better positioned to run organizations down the road.”

A Fellow’s day is structured around lectures and speakers, group exercises and journaling. Each participant goes through an individual leadership assessment, while larger group discussions focus on organizational and policy issues. Federal funding, the role of self advocates, leadership transitions, and person-centered approaches were some of the topics covered in July.

The Leadership Institute brought great minds together to study and learn and inspire,” said Shelly Christensen, MENTOR Fellow and Program Manager for the Jewish Community Inclusion Program for People with Disabilities in Minneapolis, Minnesota. “Without the MENTOR fellowship I would not have been part of this amazingly transformational experience.”

MENTOR Fellow Tami LaDoux had an “ah-ha” moment during the Institute: The executive director of Tri-Cities Residential Services in Kennewik, Washington realized she had lost her passion for her job. Rules, regulations and budgets had worn her down.

“I am proud to report that I got my passion back!” wrote Tami to her staff when she returned from the Institute. She laid out a plan based on what she had learned, including greater two-way dialogue and person-centered thinking.

“It will be hard work, but it will be fun and important!” she exclaimed.
Putting the MENTOR in mentoring

Picture college-age mentors in Miami-Dade County, Florida leading seminars for young girls on contemporary and historical female role models; budding writers in the urban enclaves of Western Massachusetts developing original plays based on their life stories; and high school students in Camden, New Jersey teaching middle and elementary school kids how to read.

These programs were created by organizations as diverse as Strong Women Strong Girls, the Barrington Stage Company and the Boys & Girls Clubs, and all were awarded Foundation grants.

“Research shows that mentoring programs pay big dividends for kids and adults,” explained Tripp Jones, The Network’s Chief Administrative Officer and President of the Foundation’s Board of Directors. “And positive role models become even more important in tough economic times.”

According to the largest mentoring study conducted in eight cities, young people with mentors are less likely to use drugs and alcohol or to hit other children; they have more positive attitudes toward school, with better grades and attendance; and they report better relations with family members (Tierney, Grossman & Resch, 1995).

These findings are no surprise to the Foundation’s 2009 Community Partners. They all have a track record of success: Boys & Girls Club participants report a 100 percent high school graduation rate and a 95 percent post-secondary attendance rate. Ninety-seven percent of parents with girls involved with Strong Women Strong Girls reported that their daughters had gained valuable new skills from the program, and 95 percent witnessed an increase in their daughter’s self esteem.

The tools and strategies organizations use to achieve these impressive results vary as widely as the kids themselves. The Big Sister Association of Boston, which serves more than 3,000 girls in Greater Boston, used their 2009 Community Partners grant to create a Big Sister blog and a Big Sister Member Portal. These innovative online tools help mentors better respond to girls, locate research and share best practices – all of which can lead to stronger relationships.

“The longer a big and little sister match lasts, the more significant the outcomes,” according to Alexis Bulkley of Big Sister.

For the young people involved in the Barrington Stage Company’s Playwright Mentoring Project, the revelations that come from dramatizing their own lives help them develop a more positive view of the future.

“By telling their stories, the youth begin to understand themselves as never before,” explained Cynthia Quinones, Barrington’s Director of Education. “Others in the group have similar problems and this shared connection is the beginning of a support system.”

As many parents grapple with the challenges of meeting basic needs for their families, these types of connections and support systems are proving vital for young people around the country.

“I’m proud of the Foundation’s commitment to mentoring programs. The timing was perfect,” said Jones. “We can’t let today’s uncertainties interfere with the positive growth and development of tomorrow’s best assets.”

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OUR MISSION

The MENTOR Network Charitable Foundation works to build on The Network’s innovative approach to human services by seeking new solutions and creative ideas for enhancing the lives of persons with disabilities and youth and families facing emotional, behavioral and other challenges, and by expanding opportunity for those we serve. The Network was founded by social entrepreneurs who believed that healthy, vibrant communities are exactly the right environments in which people with a range of abilities thrive. The Foundation is The MENTOR Network’s commitment to nurturing the excellence and innovation that ensures such environments – for those we serve, for our employees and for society as a whole.

INNOVATION

Spotlight On....
ShowMe Aquatics & Fitness
St. Charles, Missouri

Water is the “magic component” for more than 180 underserved youth and adults living with developmental or acquired disabilities in the St. Louis metropolitan area. ShowMe Aquatics & Fitness (SMA&F) – a 2009 Community Partner – offers them water and land-based physical exercise under the skilled care of physical and occupational therapists and aquatics specialists. All participants currently receive some level of financial assistance.

“Our goal is to increase opportunities for movement that are critical to maintaining physical and emotional strength,” said Jeff Campbell, SMA&F’s Vice President and Director of Operations. “We believe that gaining and improving strength, endurance and self esteem open up additional opportunities for socialization and integration into regular school and community activities.”

Established in 1999, SMA&F pursued its mission of inclusion by equipping YMCA and community pools with special lifts and modifying locker rooms so participants could gain access to water exercise, adaptive swimming lessons and physical and occupational therapy. Success followed, and SMA&F added land-based and track and field activities in 2006.

Their efforts are paying off on a global scale. One SMA&F participant traveled to Beijing this past September to compete in the Paralympic Games, placing fifth in the 100M and 200M events. Many other SMA&F athletes test their physical strength in local, regional and national marathons and games.

Currently, SMA&F is collaborating with the city of St. Charles, Missouri to build the Community Freedom Center, a warm-water aquatic, fitness and therapeutic facility. The Center will be a “barrier-free environment” that maximizes innovative programming, architecture and technology – the first of its kind in the St. Louis area.

“We believe that gaining and improving strength, endurance and self esteem open up additional opportunities for socialization and integration into regular school and community activities.”

~Jeff Campbell, SMA&F’s Vice President and Director of Operations

FY 2009 Community Partner Grant Recipients

- Abilities!, Inc.
- Adoption & Foster Care Mentoring, Inc.
- Barrington Stage Company
- Big Sister Assoc. of Greater Boston
- Boston Children’s Chorus
- Boston Debate League
- Boston Healthcare for the Homeless
- Boston Partners in Education
- Boys & Girls Club of Camden County
- Boys & Girls Club of Dorchester
- Camp Courageous
- Camp Shriver
- Center for Disability Studies
- Community Boating Center
- Cradles to Crayons, Inc.
- Encore Studio for the Performing Arts
- Family Services, Inc.
- Friendship Ventures
- Hoops Sagrado
- Learning Institute for Tomorrow
- Living Works Ventures
- Lovelane Special Needs Horseback Riding
- MA Alliance for Teen Pregnancy
- MA Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children
- More Than Words
- Neighborhood of Affordable Housing, Inc.
- Partners for Youth with Disabilities
- Pike's Peak Therapeutic Riding Center
- Senior Citizens Activities, Inc.
- ShowMe Aquatics & Fitness
- Sibling Connections
- Strong Women Strong Girls, Inc.
- The Children’s Center for Communication
- The National Leadership Consortium
- University of Minnesota

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In 2009, the Research and Training Center on Community Living at the University of Minnesota became one of the Foundation’s Community Partners. Charlie Lakin, the Center’s Director, sat down with IMPACT to talk about Leadership in the History of Developmental Disabilities, an innovative web-based wiki program funded by the Foundation.

IMPACT: What exactly is a wiki?
CL: A wiki is a page or collection of web pages designed to enable those who access them to obtain knowledge from specific entries and contribute to the content. You’ve probably heard of Wikipedia, the collaborative encyclopedia, but wikis are used in other information building and sharing applications. In this case, we’re going to create a “living” course on the history of developmental disabilities.

IMPACT: Why is the wiki the best tool for exploring this history?
CL: Everybody’s history is different. For us to write history based on our perceptions and experiences really overlooks those other histories that are equally if not more important than the ones we’ve accepted. A wiki gives everyone a chance to participate in telling the whole story. It is a repository of the history that’s meaningful to people who participate actively in the world of services and supports for persons with disabilities.

The wiki is also an intergenerational way of retaining experiences, wisdom and information that helps people link themselves to something that’s enduring.

IMPACT: Intergenerational?
CL: We’re at an important point in our field. Many of us are approaching the end of our formal careers, and I want to make sure we capture the experiences of those who have been around for a long time. When we began, most people with disabilities were in institutions. There was no entitlement for education. So much has changed, but it’s often difficult for those who work in the field to see themselves as part of a movement because they are participating in the present. I want to capture the evolution and the players who made it happen.

IMPACT: Practically speaking, how will the wiki and its information exchange work?
CL: We envision the wiki as a tree. The trunk of the tree is a core course I developed on the “History of Leadership in Developmental Disabilities.” Off of that trunk – or core – will grow branches that allow more detailed learning. Branches will then grow off one another as wiki participants add information. For example, someone might read an entry and say, “Wait a minute: I don’t think that’s right. You left off the person who…” From there, will grow another branch.

IMPACT: When will the wiki be ready?
CL: We’ll go live later this year. Most of our effort has been in building the web platform. Now, we’re working on editing the core course – or trunk.

IMPACT: How will you get to word out?
CL: Well, this is a great start and people can check www rtc umn edu for updates. We also have access to big mailing lists and national and local trade associations. Ours is a small, friendly field.

Our Community Partners are change agents within human services that are either delivering innovative care or developing new ideas and models for doing so. They are results oriented, leveraging resources and knowledge to positively impact individuals and communities and transform society’s vision of and approach to its most vulnerable members.

The Stepping Stones Fund helps those we serve through grants for job training and readiness activities, vocational and higher education, and other programs that lead to self-sufficiency and independence. Whether they are transitioning out of the foster care system, graduating from one of our therapeutic day schools or receiving other services, many young people served by The Network lack the resources and support necessary to build productive, fulfilling lives.

Because community service is The Network’s way of life, the Foundation created the Community Champions program to recognize our employees who devote extraordinary amounts of time and energy to local charities. Champions receive recognition throughout The Network, and their chosen nonprofit receives a gift of $500.00.

Grant Guidelines and Application Process
Grant applications are available online at www thementornetwork foundation.

Community Champion applications are accepted and reviewed on a rolling basis.

Stepping Stones applications are accepted and reviewed on a rolling basis.

Community Partner applications are accepted and reviewed quarterly. The deadlines for submitting grant requests for FY10 are as follows:

Fiscal Year 2010 (October 1, 2009 to September 30, 2010)

Q1: December 15, 2009
Q2: March 15, 2010
Q3: June 15, 2010
Q4: September 15, 2010

Organizations are eligible to re-apply for funding every twelve months from the date of the initial grant. Successful re-submissions will demonstrate measurable progress and outcomes from the previous funding cycle.
Q: Why did you agree to serve on the Foundation’s Community Partner Committee?
A: I’ve always believed that responsible organizations give back to the community. Whether it’s the YMCA, the Boy Scouts or my kids’ school, I make a point of giving time and money to worthy nonprofits. Historically, I have focused on those that help kids. I believe that not only do the organizations I support benefit, but I benefit personally too. My experience on the Community Partners Committee is a natural extension of my personal commitment and has opened my eyes to innovative programs I might not have seen otherwise. That exposure helps me think about both CareMeridian and the communities we serve in a different light. The same goes for the time I spend with my Network colleagues serving with me on the Committee. Hearing what they do makes me appreciate The Network’s diversity and substantial contribution to many, many people who need assistance.

Q: Why is it important for The Network to have a charitable foundation?
A: The Network’s mission is to deliver services to people in need. I believe that if we didn’t give back to our communities we would be missing an opportunity to fully demonstrate our clear commitment to that mission. I also think the Foundation fits our goal of being social entrepreneurs. Charitable giving helps The Network maintain the creative edge you need to offer high quality, innovative services. The grant process opens us up to fresh ideas currently being tried by nonprofits caring for similar people around the country. Whether it’s an arts program for at-risk youth in Boston or an equine therapy program for individuals with physical disabilities in Colorado, The Network learns and grows by supporting them.

Q: What is an example of a Foundation grant that’s made a difference in your community?
A: A neat fit with The Network’s own services. After all, we don’t make widgets; we help people do better!

I’m also really proud of a grant we gave to the Lied Discovery Children’s Museum in Las Vegas, Nevada. Lied sponsors a program called YouthWorks, which offers job training and mentoring for 100 to 150 at-risk youth from diverse cultural backgrounds in Clark County.

Clark County has some very depressed areas, especially in today’s economy. Kids use the museum as a living lab for employment training and an opportunity to prepare for the workforce. The program has been a success for 16 years. In fact, Nevada has the nation’s highest drop-out rate, but in 2007 and 2008 100 percent of YouthWorks participants graduated from high school.

Q: What is your hope for the Foundation in 2010?
A: There is a sober element to charitable giving right now. Every not-for-profit organization I’m involved with is struggling for gifts because of this bleak economic climate. People are doing more with less. They are cutting back on programs and staff. But tough times can be inspiring. Those of us on the Community Partners Committee are eager to help the most innovative, effective programs reach their goals. We are looking forward to giving in 2010!