

Philanthropy Corner – July 4, 2010
“The Continuum of Leadership”
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On this 4th day of July 234 years ago, a group of leaders made a consequential decision to seize an opportunity and to dramatically change the course of human history by signing the Declaration of Independence. As a result, Americans are bestowed with the right to celebrate life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. President Harry Truman believed that, “In periods where there is no leadership, society stands still. Progress occurs when courageous, skillful leaders seize the opportunity to change things for the better.” We owe a great deal of gratitude to our country’s founders who laid the foundation for freedom, independence and equality.

Our community is an avant-garde collection of individuals dedicated to the livelihood and survival of paradise. Here in the Florida Keys, there are thousands of citizens who are thoughtfully donating their time, skills and energy to significantly contribute to the quality of life of the residents of Monroe County through philanthropy and democratic processes. According to John F. Kennedy, “Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other,” and we are fortunate to have abundant opportunities to become more informed and involved in our community.

Leadership Monroe County (www.leadershipmonroecounty.org) provides an opportunity for leaders to become engaged on a county-wide level. This program has been building relationships for constructive alliances among Florida Keys leaders for the past 19 years. Alumni are responsible for carrying the program forward for residents who are active in leadership roles in the private sector, government, or nonprofit community organizations. Through a series of one- and multi-day sessions during a seven-month period between October to April each year, participants examine fundamental segments of the local community and gather information to help them contribute to and make quality leadership decisions. Sessions taught by active community leaders cover topics such as the media, humanities, environment and natural resources (with a particular emphasis on the Everglades), tourism and the local economy, government, education, housing and land use, health and human services, military and the judicial system, as well as leadership skill development. Recruitment socials for program participants are occurring throughout the Keys in July.

The City of Key West (www.keywestcity.com) believes that educated citizens create a strong community and offers citizens an opportunity to step up as leaders and make a difference. “If you ever thought you could manage the City better, (the Key West Ambassador’s Academy) is your chance to learn the ins and outs of city management and have your suggestions implemented.” Since its inception 13 years ago, this interactive program educates citizens about the City’s government processes through a series of nine unique and informative sessions offered twice each year hosted by elected officials and city staff. Participants are currently being recruited for the July through October session.

Philanthropists and the nonprofit sector also provides a means for citizens to demonstrate leadership for the public good. The advisors of the Marion Stevens Fund showed leadership by partnering with the Community Foundation of the Florida Keys to equip community volunteers with the skills to be good stewards and nonprofit leaders. Recognizing that board leadership is a key component to nonprofit success, each spring starting in February the CFFK's Leadership Success Academy (www.cffk.org) trains volunteer board members in effective leadership skills in nonprofit management to assure benefactors that their funds are used wisely and organizations are operated effectively and efficiently. It was community activist Marion Stevens' philanthropy and the vision of those who followed her that was the basis for the creation of this program.

Our community is fortunate to have opportunities for our local citizens to learn about the issues facing our city, county and communities in order to become engaged as leaders. These three programs mentioned here, the Leadership Monroe County, Key West Ambassador's Academy and the CFFK Leadership Success Academy are complimentary for those who want to enhance their ability to improve the quality of life for us all. Individuals from all walks of life including judges, city managers, government officials, nonprofit leaders, retirees, entrepreneurs, business executives and educators have all participated in these programs.

No community is stronger than the quality of its citizens engaged in leadership. On this 4th of July, in addition to thanking our founding fathers who guaranteed our freedom and independence, we should also be thanking all the ordinary citizens who took part in striving for American independence and creating the United States of America. Leadership is action---each of us has the ability to become leaders who guide our community in a positive direction. The true test of a leader is the conviction and will to carry on he leaves in others.

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