Pulaski Tomorrow: Creating the Leaders of Today

In 2009, at the first meeting of Hawkinsville’s newly established Pulaski County Archway Partnership program, local leaders quickly identified one of their community’s top priority needs. “Representatives looked across the table at one another and recognized they had held leadership positions (in Hawkinsville) for too long,” says Manse Jennings, the senior executive vice president for ComSouth Telecommunications. “We also recognized that people who wanted to emerge as leaders had not been properly supported in the past.”

As it turned out, the collaboration with Archway—a community development initiative created by the University of Georgia—provided the perfect avenue to identify and engage Hawkinsville’s future leaders. Founded on principles of collaboration and knowledge-based decision making, Archway works to locate higher education resources (students, faculty and staff) across the University System of Georgia that can assist the community in meeting its needs. On the local level, decision-making occurs through consensus by a body of local leaders, from various community entities, referred to as the Archway Partnership Executive Committee.

The result of initial meetings in Hawkinsville was a leadership initiative, Pulaski Tomorrow. One of Pulaski Tomorrow’s first orders of business was to tap UGA’s JW Fanning Institute for Leadership Development (Fanning) to help...
develop a program curriculum and direct Train-the-Trainer sessions, which would train local individuals to be facilitators for a leadership program.

Success was instant. Since 2010, Pulaski Tomorrow has graduated four classes totaling 70 participants, who are poised to become the new leaders in their community. “I believe this organization makes a difference in one’s self-awareness of being a better steward of their leadership skills, whether it’s in their home, church, job or civic group,” says Pulaski Tomorrow chairman Robert Herman. “We have seen graduates rise to positions in government, receive job promotions and start programs in the community.”

A perfect example is the Hawkinsville Hoops League (HHL), which was founded in 2012 by three Pulaski Tomorrow graduates: Tyler Jenkins (2010), Jeff Tarver (2011) and Nevin Shennett (2012). The HHL uses basketball as a vehicle for community outreach and as a mentoring opportunity. But sport, which teaches young men to respect their fellow teammates and how to work together for a common goal, is only one part of the five-week program. The youth are also taught life skills such as how to tie a tie, how to behave in an interview, and how to apply to college.

“The Hawkinsville Hoops League has been a monumental success,” says Nevin Shennett. In both the summer of 2012 and 2013, the League had 70 participants and typically serves boys ranging in age from 13 to 17, although it’s open to anyone. “This has been in

great part to the help provided by Michelle Elliott, the Pulaski Archway Professional. She has been a means of encouragement and a wonderful asset to our cause. From her extensive list of invaluable higher education contacts, to her ability to help our ideas come to fruition in a great way, our vision would have not been possible without her wonderful contribution.”

But perhaps Hoops League’s—and Pulaski Tomorrow’s—greatest success comes from the way the entire community has embraced the program. Sponsorships, support, and encouragement has come from a list of groups including Pulaski County, City of Hawkinsville, Central Georgia Technical College, Hawkinsville-Pulaski Recreation Department, Pulaski County Board of Education, Pulaski Tomorrow, volunteers from Robins Air Force Base, Volunteer Macon and others. Local businesses, churches and individuals have prepared meals for the youth, volunteered as chaperones and coaches, and cheered them on in their games.

“The Hawkinsville Hoops League has been a catalyst for positive change in the community,” says Tyler Jenkins. “The young men who participated in the program not only exercised their muscles, but more importantly, exercised their minds, learning firsthand the importance of education, character, hard work and integrity. Hawkinsville Hoops League believes that positive change is possible and people must stand up and take back their communities.”

Currently, Pulaski Tomorrow is working with Fanning on developing a youth community involvement program that they hope to pilot in spring 2014. They are also in the process of finalizing steps to become their own 501(c)3 and officially separating from the Archway Partnership—a critical step in long-term sustainability. Beginning December 2013, the organization will be led by a nine person Board of Directors and administrated by Pulaski Tomorrow graduate Ana Maria Lugo. Graduate students and staff from the Archway Partnership, as well as the UGA School of Social Work Institute for Nonprofit Organizations, played a tremendous role in this accomplishment.

“It’s pretty hard for me to explain the growth that has taken place here in just two years,” said Archway Professional Michelle Elliott. “The biggest accomplishment though, is that the community took on perhaps their greatest weakness and are well on their way to defeating it.”

The Archway Partnership is a University of Georgia community-engagement, economic development platform. It was created to enhance the University’s land-grant mission of teaching, research and service, while addressing self-identified community priorities in selected locations across the state.

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