Now in its 25th year, Leadership Seminole continues to help our community and its leaders grow together
Since 1993, the Leadership Seminole program has challenged more than 1,100 community leaders to ask themselves a simple yet powerful question...

What will my legacy be?

Twenty-five years later, their answers and actions have translated into more than $1.1 million raised and thousands of volunteer hours given to local nonprofit organizations – a remarkable legacy that grows more impressive with each passing year.

“One of the first things we do with each new Leadership Seminole class that comes through the program is have them answer this critical question about their legacy,” says Dawn Kraus, president of Leadership Seminole. “Each class then has to agree upon and select a legacy project – a community service project – to focus on. Truly amazing things can happen through collaboration, compassion, and camaraderie. The legacy project is our way of investing in our community.”

Leadership Seminole – founded in partnership with Seminole State College, community chambers of commerce, and business professionals – was modeled after other nationwide leadership programs. Leadership Seminole classes are formed once a year and include about 50 local men and women. The class meets for one full day every month for 10 months, and each session immerses the class in a different facet of Seminole County – from education and economic development to healthcare and criminal justice and more. Between sessions, classmates stay in constant communication to plan their legacy projects and build rapport.

This year, Leadership Seminole is celebrating a quarter-century as a top-notch resource for future and present leaders who want to learn about their county and make a difference right here in our corner of Central Florida. Leadership Seminole also serves as the convener of The Seminole Vision Conference, where community leaders come together to talk about the critical issues in Seminole County and how to address them. Since its launch in 1996, the conference has tackled top priorities including economic development and homelessness.

Long after the classes graduate from the program, the educational arm of Leadership Seminole continues to give local professionals of all backgrounds an opportunity to learn and have an impact together.

“We strive to connect our local leaders and enrich them through education and exposure to the ins and outs of Seminole County,” says Dawn. “We want people in the program to feel a passion for our community and help it grow to become an even better place.”

Every year, professionals from a broad spectrum of industries apply to the program and commit to its 10-month curriculum. Class members begin with a two-day orientation retreat followed by monthly sessions. Session topics include government, arts and culture, human services, public safety, and environmental preservation.

To bring their legacy project to fruition, classmates host fundraisers and log volunteer hours for organizations in need. Along the way, Leadership Seminole members learn what it takes to turn a vision into reality.

“We’ve had so many incredible organizations that we’ve been able to help and support,” says Dawn. “Our legacy projects have impacted the lives of children, women, seniors, families, the homeless, and uninsured individuals. There’s so much to accomplish and limitless potential as to how we can make a difference.”
Learning Together

The Leadership Seminole curriculum is designed to challenge the minds of its participants and present a deep dive into topics that affect our community.

“People who go through the program are often amazed by the things they learn and how interconnected our community is,” says Denise Ward, program director and graduate of Class 14. “I know we’ve made an impression because I still get calls to this day from graduates who want to know more about something they learned or want to connect with a particular organization they were exposed to. I’m so glad to be able to help people build bridges and relationships.”

I can tell you that everyone who entered the program realized that you got what you put into it.” – Mayor David Mealor of Lake Mary, a graduate of Class 2

Like any commitment in life, though, the Leadership Seminole program gives back to participants only what they put into it. Participation is highly interactive and experiential with opportunities for networking and team building throughout. Each session is an opportunity for participants to develop lifelong relationships with their classmates and fellow community leaders. Class members also gain thorough background knowledge on important issues that impact their lives, companies, and community on a daily basis.

“When I attended Leadership Seminole as a captain at the Sheriff’s Office, I thought I already knew all there was to know about Seminole County, but boy was I wrong,” says Sheriff Dennis Lemma, a graduate of Class 15. “I learned so much more about our community, and it has helped me in my role as Sheriff today. Going through the program allowed me to have a holistic view of all the services being offered in Seminole County and how they all tie in. I’ve also made lifelong friends and cultivated lasting relationships that have helped me navigate our systems.”

The program has brought so much value to Sheriff Lemma, both personally and professionally, that he encourages at least one member of the Sheriff’s Office to participate every year as part of their leadership training. He has also returned and engaged with the program as a facilitator and speaker.

“Every session is different and interesting, and it’s a really unique way to learn about how things work in Seminole County,” adds Tina Calderone, a Seminole County School Board member and a graduate of the very first Leadership Seminole class in 1993. “Typically, you wouldn’t have this exposure on a regular basis. For a businessperson to have an opportunity to meet with county leaders face-to-face, from the property appraiser to the supervisor of elections, is really wonderful. It’s fascinating to see all that it takes to run Seminole County.”
Leading Together

In tandem with the monthly sessions, Leadership Seminole class members work together on their legacy projects. The vast and multifaceted needs of Seminole County are brought to the forefront as each class unites to support a chosen nonprofit organization in need.

In the last five years alone, Leadership Seminole classes have supported organizations including The Sharing Center, Boys Town Central Florida, Pathways to Care, HOPE Helps, Friends of Children and Families, the Boys & Girls Clubs of Central Florida, and SWOP (now known as Inspire of Central Florida). The combination of leadership, brain power, and sweat equity to solve a problem and serve the community is mutually beneficial to all involved.

Whether they are hosting community fundraisers, pooling class resources and connections to source donations, or putting in the physical hard work, Leadership Seminole participants are focused on action, impact, and empowerment.

In 2011, class members identified a need at Harvest Time International in Sanford, a nonprofit organization, which helps the working poor, low-income individuals, and homeless families in Central Florida gain access to a range of resources. Harvest Time International wanted to address a deficit in adult dental care provided for low-income families without insurance. Members of the leadership team put their heads together to create a plan to renovate and retrofit a space at the Harvest Time headquarters to be used as a dental-care facility.

“Leadership Seminole really made this idea we’d had for some time possible,” says Pastor John Murphy, founder and president of Harvest Time International and a graduate of Class 22. “They went from planning to execution to building out the space and getting it in operation.”

The dental center has since evolved over time, but Pastor John credits Leadership Seminole for getting the idea off the ground.

“Leadership Seminole has been a great tool for Harvest Time International,” adds Pastor John. “Our organization has also stayed involved by partnering up to host alumni events on our campus. It’s been a real joy to work directly with the organization.”

Tina is amazed at how far the program has come since its launch in 1993.

“The program has changed so much and for the better,” she says. “The legacy projects being done now are incredible. In my class, we spent a weekend at a group home for disabled adults, made goodie bags for residents, and did a lot of cleanup work like shampooing the carpets, washing windows, and beautifying the space. Then we cooked a big barbecue lunch. It was wonderful. I still enjoy the many friendships I made in Leadership Seminole so many years ago.”

The first class’s humble beginning is a nod to the dramatic growth and improvement Leadership Seminole has experienced, with undoubtedly more to come in the future.

continued on page 38
Thriving Together

Several years ago, Leadership Seminole created an alumni association to foster continued engagement once a class graduates from the program. Volunteer graduates support the alumni association and serve as the glue to keep the camaraderie, leadership, and community alive.

“When we look at our careers, no matter what job we have, it’s truly all about genuine relationships,” says Dawn. “When someone graduates from Leadership Seminole, they’ll forever have that experience with their class and have a connection to all of our alumni.”

Every session is different and interesting, and it’s a really unique way to learn about how things work in Seminole County.”

– Seminole County School Board member Tina Calderone, a graduate of Class 1

“I was in the second class and I can tell you that everyone who entered the program realized that you got what you put into it,” says Mayor David Mealor of Lake Mary, who was a deputy mayor and UCF professor at the time. “We really bonded, and I developed relationships that continue to this day. Leadership Seminole training helped me differentiate myself in communicating policies and procedures that became helpful in my work in education and economic development in Seminole County. I still use the knowledge I acquired, and I value all that the program offers to its alumni.”

Alumni events are opportunities to stay abreast of trending topics in the business world through panel discussions and interviews with transformational leaders, top executives, and speakers with unique expertise in the region and in their fields. Some events are also open to the general public – like Leadership Seminole’s premiere event, the Leadership Summit. It’s a full day of learning from a series of dynamic leaders.

At the annual Community Leadership Celebration Luncheon, which serves as a graduation ceremony for each class, more than 400 guests celebrate the participants’ success. The event also features the presentation of the annual Leadership Legend Award, which recognizes an established leader who has made a positive impact on Seminole County.

“We have an amazing board, executive council, and alumni base who volunteer and help make all these events and efforts possible,” says Dawn. “They are critical to our success. Reaching 25 years is hard to believe, but it’s exciting, and we look forward to many more.”

Leadership Seminole is a tuition-based, 10-month program beginning each August. To learn more about the organization and its programs, visit LeadershipSeminole.org.

At last year’s annual Community Leadership Celebration Luncheon, over 400 guests celebrated the newest graduating class.