

ALP Member Profile
Interview with Sarah Savage

List interviewee's name: Sarah Savage

Title: President and CEO of Leadership Huntsville/Madison County



List program names:

Leadership (Flagship) - Annual flagship 10-month program for adults that emphasizes learning through experience and provides in-depth knowledge to give them the tools and a network to better serve the community.

Focus (Executive Briefing) -Interactive, two-day session for executives that introduces participants to our community's challenges and possibilities. Highly condensed, fast-track version of our flagship program.

Connect (Young Professionals) - Specifically designed for young professionals under the age of 40. Connect is designed to help them learn, engage and network for increased community involvement.

Impact (Issues Based Program) - Graduate program for community Leadership program graduates who focus on one issue, once a year, to impact systemic change.

Challenge (High School Youth) - Summer program for our youth leaders, designed to expose them to community challenges and develop their leadership skills for service in their schools and community.

Management Academy (Business Leader Training) - Provide training for experienced managers to enhance their executive management skills for practical application in the workplace and future executive opportunities in their companies.

Masters (Pillars of the Community) - To enhance knowledge of mature participants about Huntsville/Madison County's successes and challenges and inspire each to pursue opportunities that enrich their lives and the community.

Alumni Association (Continuing Education) - Ongoing program for all Leadership graduates with events and activities to help stay connected and involved year-round.

List Website

<http://leadershipsv.org/>

Tell us about you

What's your background?

Sarah Savage is the President/CEO of Leadership Huntsville/Madison County, Inc., whose mission is to identify, educate and inspire leaders to serve our community. She has held that position for 13 years.

She was born in Nashville, Tennessee and raised in Dothan, Alabama. She graduated from Auburn University with a degree in Public Relations/Speech Communications and a Journalism minor. After completing two management training programs with SouthTrust Bank in Birmingham, she worked there for about two years after graduation. She continued with SouthTrust when she and her husband moved to Huntsville in 1991. She continued to work for SouthTrust as its director of marketing/public relations through 1996, leaving to join Crestwood Medical Center in the same role that year.

During her tenure at Crestwood, at age 30, Sarah chaired the first all-women built Habitat for Humanity home in Madison County. Shortly after, while at Crestwood, she was selected for Leadership Huntsville/Madison County Class 11. After Sarah's graduation, Leadership announced the opening for their first full-time executive director, to succeed Dr. Ralph Green. Sarah joined Leadership in that role in 1998.

At that time, Leadership was part of the Huntsville/Madison County Chamber of Commerce Foundation, and had an adult and youth program. Leadership has since grown to eight programs, incorporated as a non-profit, moved out of the Chamber and has ten employees. When Sarah joined the program, annual revenues were about \$70K per year. Revenues now are over \$600K per year and program graduates number more than 1800. Leadership program graduates serve on every major non-profit and appointed board and commission in Madison County, and more that 55% of elected officials at the local, state and federal level are graduates.

In addition to her Rotary membership, Sarah and serves on the Huntsville/Madison County Community Foundation board, the national Association of Leadership Professionals board, and on the advisory council for the Alabama Community Leadership Network (ACLN). She also serves on a variety of local committees working local issues.

Sarah's past board service includes: Junior League of Huntsville Advisory Council; Past President, North AL PRCA; WEDC Foundation Board; Local Chapter Chair & State Board – Alabama Citizens for Constitutional Reform; Huntsville Pilgrimage Association Board; and Volunteer Center Board. She has also served in committee/volunteer roles for: Covenant Presbyterian; Whistlestop Barbeque Festival; Girl Scouts of N. AL; Junior League of Huntsville; Junior Achievement; Chamber of Commerce; United Way of Madison County and Central AL; Huntsville Land Trust; Adopt-a-School; and the National Children's Advocacy Center.

How long have you been working in community leadership development?

13 Years – Sarah became the Executive Director the year following her completion of Leadership Huntsville

What's on your bookshelf right now? (What are you reading?)

For fun, Sarah likes to read anything from John Grisham to Jane Austen. Right now she is reading Emma. She recently read Five Dysfunctions of a Team by Patrick Lencioni which explores the fundamental causes of organizational politics and team failure. Sarah has integrated what she learned in this book into her programs and their internal office culture. She plans to read Edward De Bono's – Six Thinking Hats over the Holidays.

Infrastructure

Tell us a little about your program(s)? What do you offer?

(See above)

If you had to list the 2-3 things that you felt contributed to your programs success?

- Very much strong visionary leadership from the volunteers.
- Community culture. They have a community that is very open and receptive to great leadership in addition to having a strong entrepreneurial nature and a willingness to try new things. They are not all about the status quo.

What do you see on the horizon for community leadership programs?

- We [as leadership professionals] are in a unique position in our nation's history to become more and more relevant as the years progress. It is very much our duty to promote excellence in leadership and raise the expectations of the community (from elected officials, etc.) and to make sure the leaders know each other, know the community's history and are able to function well together.
- Sarah see's tremendous opportunity to prove our relevance [as leadership organizations] and make a great impact in our community and states and nation.
- Global/ International Leadership opportunities – Are there partnerships available to international/global leadership programs. What does great leadership look like in all of these cultures? When working with different rules, laws and structures – how can we promote community leadership in this global community? Communities are the building blocks. You need to have these strong individual communities to have a strong state → nation → global community.

Volunteers/Boards and Committees

What volunteer resources do you have and what systems/infrastructure helps you run your programs well?

Leadership Huntsville has concentrated (over past 7 years) primarily on governance. They have a strategic board of directors (not program focused) and from there, they have a variety of committees. They have about 250 volunteers that help run the programs. Every volunteer has a job description, an organizational chart (where they fit in/what their role is) and what their expectations are for their individual performance and their contribution. The goals of the volunteers are that they have are making a meaningful contribution, it is valuable use of their time and that it's fun.

What advice would you share on how to keep your volunteers inspired and engaged?

Make sure the volunteer experience is just as good and valuable as their class experience. When Sarah looks at what Leadership Huntsville offer to their volunteers, she want them to be able to enjoy and also learn from it.

"If your vision is for one year, plant wheat. If your vision is for ten years, plant trees. If your vision is for a lifetime, plant people." Their work is to create more servant leaders.

Sharpening your Saw

What resources help you make your programs better? (Where do you look for best practices, process improvement, curriculum?)

Sarah is constantly using ALP and looking at other programs and other professionals in our ranks (i.e. professional facilitators) for best practices.

What keeps you going?

Sarah: "My work is my mission. The ability to do what I do everyday is an incredible opportunity. I think it's important; especially for ED's not to get burned out, to actually stay involved and go the program days, listen to the testimonials, because it reminds us why we do what we do. This is exciting work, how much better does it get? Going with the class members on their day sessions helps internalize the experiences. It's important for us not to lose sight of the core mission which is to educate and inspire.

What advice do you have for other program directors?

Sarah: "It's very easy in these jobs to maintain the status quo, however, we have been concentrated on keeping things fresh and bringing in new speakers and new topics. It is important to not settle for the status quo and continuously try new things (new speakers, new programs, new fundraising models) and to ask the questions about what we need to do in order to take our program to the next level."

Great Ideas

New projects/initiatives that the organization is developing to advance their mission and/or generate revenue?

- The organization is going to start pulling from things from national strategies (ie. Looking at the book: [Blue Ocean Strategy](#)).
- The next two areas of focused growth are going to be outreach training (team building, leadership and community engagement) and launching a Planned Giving campaign (through partnering with the local community foundation).

New ideas that have upgraded/improved the operation of the flagship program and/or organization (e.g., something around recruitment, opening retreats, etc.)

-Most ideas have come from other programs. The governance piece, setting up the infrastructure in a way that is strategic and making sure everyone is clear of their role (as a volunteer) has been a huge improvement to the volunteer structure. Also, they have embedded membership dues within the invoice when people are accepted to the class which has been a financial benefit.

- They are going to be adding online applications for recruitment purposes and implementing an application fee.
- They have a curriculum committee that came up with objectives for each of the session days. This helps tremendously with standardization and discourage potential agenda setting with committee members.
- We use survey monkey the day of for all of our programs.
- To prep speakers, they send the objective for the class and samples of questions. They ask the speakers 'within the context of your remarks, please answer these questions.' They also make sure there is 20-30 minutes of Q&A with each speaker.