

ALP Member Profile
Interview with ALP Member for electronic newsletter



Name : Wendy Thomas **Title:** Executive Director
Program: Leadership Tulsa, formed in 1973
List Website : www.leadershiptulsa.org

Snapshot:

Masters in Arts Administration
Executive Director of Leadership Tulsa for 10 years
Leadership Tulsa's mission is to identify, develop and connect diverse leaders who impact our community through service.

Staff structure:
3 full time staff members and a board of directors

Tell us about you

Q. What's your background?

A. Non-profit management through arts administration. Masters is Arts Administration through business school.

Q. How long have you been working in community leadership development?

A. I was working for the Arts Council which looked at connecting arts with other sectors in community. I was thinking about what's next and a board member of Leadership Tulsa told me about the job opening. I hadn't gone through the program yet but had desired to. I put my name in the hat and went through job search process. And I've been here for 10 years.

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

A. I read via my Kindle so I may not remember the titles! I'm an avid and very eclectic reader. A historical book called "The Middle East."
Another book about "how you will accomplish everything you say you want to in a year" but I can't think of the name. I am getting ready to read 5 Dysfunctions of a Team to help another non-profit I work with.

Infrastructure

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

A.

Flagship Program:

Our highly successful flagship program is now offered twice a year to classes of 40 – 50 leaders each, selected through a competitive application process. Throughout their nine-month journey they meet with our city's top leaders, tour it's most innovative and inglorious corners, discuss the opportunities and challenges we face and hone their leadership skills. Each participant is also assigned to serve on a local non-profit board of directors. The cost to participate in Leadership Tulsa is \$2,400 and tuition assistance is offered to those with financial need.

New Voices Board Internships:

In recent years, Leadership Tulsa has expanded our community education offerings to take advantage of our key capabilities as an organization. We are partnering with the Tulsa Area United Way to help improve minority participation on non profit boards by identifying and training potential board members from under-represented populations. This program is free to participants.

Typros Board Internships:

We are also helping to train up the next generation of community leaders through a strategic partnership with the Metro Chamber's Typros program, offering young professionals opportunities to receive board training and serve as board interns. This program is free to participants.

North Tulsa Development Council:

Our most recent expansion is our new partnership with the North Tulsa Development Council, bringing opportunities for leadership development and capacity building to this vital, but under appreciated part of our Tulsa community. Our goal is to build grassroots leadership as well as build bridges across our community, moving Tulsa closer to the ideal of "One Tulsa." Class members will participate in project based service learning projects instead of board internships. This program costs just \$150.

Paragon Awards: Leadership Tulsa's premier opportunity for recognizing its members' contributions to the community. This evening event is open to the public, but there is a fee to attend. Tulsa area agencies are asked to nominate Leadership Tulsa members who have made an outstanding impact on their organization. A distinguished panel of judges select the three winners, who receive a check for \$3,000, to be presented to their nominating agency. They also receive a beautiful, engraved award. This event will be held on October 14, 2010, at the Philbrook Museum of Art.

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

A.

Internal

Really good at risk taking. Willing to try new things. Adjust and adapt.

Really been able to maintain a competitive selection process that is fair. Got set of established criteria so we can explain why they do or don't get in.

External

Basic philanthropic mindset in our community. We've had long term community support.

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

Dealing with technology – both curriculum development and delivery. We're still asking "what do we do with all the social networking?"

We are using technology as a connecting point for alumni. Redoing website to make more interactive our members but the challenge is that time is so limited, how to we get information across best?

Volunteers/Boards and Committees

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

A. We have 30 board members. We are an independent 501c3.

As a result of our strategic planning process, we went from 12 committees to 6 as a major restructure. Made up of board members and the larger alumni network. This came about because I was feeling that our organization was silo'd. I was the only one who knew what each committee was doing. Plus hard to find people for all the different committees. We really needed to use people's time well. So less committees with board members serving on each created continuity.

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

A.

1. Keep board leadership focused on the visible things. We have a working board, but we keep them focused on things that visibly move the organization forward. They need to be able to see the results of their efforts. So, key roles include fundraising, recruitment, strategy and volunteering at key events plus policy making since we only have 3 staff.

2. Provide adequate staff support to make it easy for volunteers to be successful. They can't get bogged down with mass mailings and database management. That's for staff. Keep volunteers using their highest functions. Our job is to make their job easy.
3. Create a culture of fun and appreciation. The real fun is solving problems. If people like being together and solving issues, you don't necessarily need to create artificial fun. Leaders at the top model this. We allow folks to disagree without being disagreeable. For example- I clap in a board member when there isn't a unanimous vote. We value individual thought. Also, instead of starting with board voting items, we start with higher level questions. Committee reports then stay brief and to the point.

Sharpening your Saw

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

A. Kaizen- the theory of continuous improvement. Lots of systems in place to get constant feedback from participants. Outcomes identified for each of our programs. The important question isn't whether they like the speaker.... it's "was it thought-provoking, will it cause them to do something different?"

We utilize talent and expertise of our members/alum. Of our 2000+ alumni, we have 600-1,000 of our alumni around and 300 are actively engaged. We have experts in many fields from which to go to.

Q. What keeps you going?

A. The people. We attract the best people and they bring their best to the program. It's amazing to experience the intellectual curiosity. And, it's fun to be in the know about everything in the community which our program affords us to do.

Q. What advice do you have for other program directors?

A. Don't sweat the small stuff! I heard it said once that you can't juggle too many balls. You only have to keep track of the balls made of glass- those of relative importance. Also, things don't always go as planned. Be flexible. Don't assume that something that gets started will run forever.

The executive director has a really important role of keeping organization relevant. I have to be cued in on issues facing community, the mood of community, trends, etc.

We also need to be looking for strategic partnerships that share some part of our mission.

Example: We worked with our YP organization in our community run by Chamber. Many of their folks had gone through our program and they were interested in board internships. We got wind that others might want to start something like this and we were already so good at. So, we established this partnership and provided this for the young professionals. We send out 80 YP's every year to sit on boards. No funding for this program. We donate our time.

Example: United Way- the New Voices program to develop minority leadership. I was on a community investment panel for UW and they were talking about this challenge, and how hard it was. I piped up and said, I think I can help you. I brainstormed the concept and went back to UW and they fund it and we run it.

Great Ideas

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

A. North Tulsa Development Council – Background: In 1921 there was a Race Riot which created an incredible legacy of pain. North Tulsa has been fraught with leadership, trust and development issues for many years and created a very economically disadvantaged population. Our former mayor created pilot leadership program

called the North Tulsa Development Council. It went on for a second year but needed stability, knowledge and funding. They approached us for collaboration. Now they are under our umbrella. It's a geographic based program with tremendous opportunities. We have a 3 year agreement with them. We are fundraising for this program and we put money in the budget to cover some of my time.

Also this past year we did a holiday ornament as a fundraiser. This was wildly successful. We focus on some historic building each year and make it collectible/ limited edition. It worked because the project comes at a time when we aren't that busy. We used to do the community board game but it was a huge effort. Made lots of money but it was lots of work.

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

A. Biggest eye opener for me came after one of our national CLA conferences. Because of content there, we went from a program day chair structure to a committee/curriculum development structure.

And now, we have restructured all our class days. Because of the stereotypes associated with each of the different geographical areas of Tulsa, we now have program days in the different areas rather than having a topic. This has expanded awareness of what the true DNA of our communities is and the opportunities and challenges facing in our whole community as well as the innovations happening. In other words, we've adapted our curriculum to the unique situation in our community.