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Local Retirees Give Back to Their Community

By Lisa Frederick | Apr 25 2016 | 10:00 AM



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Walter C. Kirk III

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Wisdom Project gaining national interest

A leadership program for Gainesville and Hall County retirees is gaining new admirers and interest from throughout the nation after a recent feature article in the *Wall Street Journal*.

The Wisdom Project (<http://www.vision2030.org/senior-leadership>), a collaboration between Brenau University and the Greater Hall Chamber of Commerce, helps retirees channel their wisdom and skills in creative ways through action and advocacy, explained Kathy Amos, executive director of Brenau's Center for Lifetime Study.

"The program provides our graduates with an avenue to use their wisdom and expertise for the benefit of their community," Amos said. "It's an opportunity for these individuals to give back to their community in a very real and tangible way."

In the wake of the national publicity, Amos has received a steady stream of emails and phone calls from officials as far away as Washington state, many of them seeking to duplicate the innovative program's success.

"It struck a chord. It resonated with people," Amos said. "We caught the attention of the *Wall Street Journal* at the American Society on Aging's national conference last year. After our workshop, people wanted to know if we had a franchise available. We don't know of any other programs like it."

The Wisdom Project launched in 2012, and to date, more than 100 participants have gone through the seven-session program that highlights social services, education, health care, government, business and agriculture, arts and entertainment, and aging issues. The Wisdom Keepers, as participants are called, explore local issues and opportunities, and engage with community leaders.

Many of the ideas and projects initiated through the program are having a real impact, Amos said. For example:

- A retired airline pilot was inspired to approach local airport officials with a proposal that has helped stimulate more business for them.
- Another Wisdom Keeper coordinated a volunteer docent program for three of Brenau's art galleries.
- A nonprofit transportation service that provides door-to-door rides for seniors will launch this spring with the help and support of a Wisdom Keeper.

"There are many, many other examples. The purpose of the program and value of the projects our Wisdom Keepers undertake isn't evidenced in just seniors thinking about seniors," Amos said. "So much of it benefits the community as a whole — all ages, all economic groups."

"This is seniors benefiting everybody," agreed Julie Ferguson, a lifelong area resident and recent retiree from the information and technology field. She went through the Wisdom Project last year, and is now helping coordinate sessions for the class that begins this fall. It is a true community program, she said, bringing together businesses, civic and governmental bodies and agencies.

"It's unique, it's unusual, and it's going a long way to keep retired folks engaged in active ways where they can truly help out and be a benefit to the community," Ferguson said. "It's an example of a program that makes me proud to be a resident here."



Julie Ferguson, Kathy Amos and Dick Osborne

Walter C. Kirk III

It showcases the forward thinking of Gainesville and Hall County leaders, she elaborated, and bolsters the area's efforts to become a top destination for retirees.

The Wisdom Project was born from the Greater Hall Chamber of Commerce's VISION 2030 (<http://www.ghcc.com/about/vision-2030.php>) initiative in 2005. The goal was to create a solid and clear blueprint for community success.

The Wisdom Project brought to fruition the chamber's goal for Gainesville-Hall County to have a senior leadership program that built on the experience and expertise of the area's growing 55 and older population.

Initial thoughts were to model it after traditional Chamber of Commerce-style leadership programs for professionals, where the emphasis is mostly on networking and career development, but Amos and others pushed for something different.

"What is the advantage to an older person to go through this program?" Amos recalls asking. "These folks are retired — so what are the outcomes that we expect for them if they participate?"

It was important that participants have an opportunity to use their wisdom, their skills and experience in a meaningful way.

"It's an opportunity for these folks to shine. Working with older adults for as long as I have, I see how vibrant they are," Amos said. "That's what I love – the self-actualization that I've seen come from this."

That has been the case for Dick Osborne, a fairly new Hall County resident and Wisdom Keeper since last year.

"It is easy to fall into a trap of being so inward-focused and focused only on your own life," Osborne said. "The Wisdom Project provided a whole new avenue of looking beyond myself and getting involved in the community and ways to focus on others."

Osborne, an Air Force retiree and former consultant, was seeking ways to get involved in his new community, but initially thought he was too new to the area to become a Wisdom Keeper.

A friend and mentor encouraged him to look at the situation differently. Involvement in the program was just what he needed to learn more about his new community – "Go through the Wisdom Project so you get to know Gainesville and Hall County," he was advised.

Osborne is now working to create organizational structure for Wisdom Keepers post-graduation, and with Amos and Ferguson on upcoming Wisdom Program sessions.

Hopes are high for the program's continued success and longevity. Amos would like to expand their offerings to include online and in-person workshops, along with new programs that study and explore issues that affect the retired and elderly and aim to enhance their lives.

"There's an important component of wisdom known as 'generativity,' and it basically addresses the issue of how we are giving back to our community and to our families. That is reflected not just in dollars and cents, but in your time, your talents and in your efforts to make where you live better than it was before you came," Amos said. "And I think that is what these Wisdom Keepers are doing."

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