

LEADING TO COMMON GROUND:

FOSTERED BY CAPACITY-BUILDING EFFORT, CONNECTIONS GROW BETWEEN TWO WICHITA MINORITY COMMUNITIES

By Chris Green



Fifteen participants in the Community Leadership Development Project, a new leadership program aimed at Wichita minorities, celebrated their graduation last year, along with program organizers. The group represented the inaugural class of the program, which was a collaboration between Wichita's African American Coalition and the Kansas Hispanic Education & Development Foundation. Organizers continue to look for partnerships to allow additional classes to enroll in the program. (courtesy photo)

Brandon Johnson first looked to start a leadership and community engagement organization in 2010, talking the idea over with the mentor he'd had since age 9.

Because of a new leadership program aimed at the minority community, the 26-year-old Wichitan could count on a few more allies for his effort when he, along with a co-founder, officially started Community Operations Recovery Empowerment Inc. (CORE) the following year.

Johnson's links to Roberto Baeza and Marcos Montemayor, who serve on CORE's 10-member board, came through their participation in the inaugural class of the Community Leadership Development Project. Montemayor serves as the board's president.

A partnership between Wichita's African American Coalition and the Kansas Hispanic Education & Development Foundation, the Community Leadership Development Project graduated its inaugural class of 15 last year.

"With that program, I'm connected to the Hispanic community in a way I probably wouldn't have been beforehand," says Johnson, CORE's executive director.

For Johnson, featured in last year's KLC documentary, "Draw a New Picture," the program helped open the door to new avenues for making progress. He is presently building upon his skills as participant in the Kansas Leadership Center's yearlong Art and Practice of Civic Leadership Development program for Kansans in their 20s and 30s.

CORE focuses on career development; tutoring, mentoring and counseling; prevention and intervention; and community service and neighborhood revitalization. It has launched programs to bring men into schools as mentors and to teach youth gardening, and is developing a summer jobs program.

In addition to meeting two individuals who would join his board through the Community Leadership Development Project, Johnson made connections there that led him to a Hispanic community activist, Sulma Arias, executive director of Sunflower Community Action. The two opened a dialogue last year about fostering stronger ties between the two communities.

Hispanics represented about 15 percent of Wichita's population in the 2010 census while African Americans made up just under 12 percent. Although efforts to better connect the two populations remain a work in progress, what's happened so far fits with what

organizers had in mind when they launched the Community Leadership Development Project.

A trio of KLC alumni – state Rep. Melody McCray-Miller, Yolanda Camarena and Wakeelah Martinez – helped spearhead the program's creation, which was initially funded by a grant from the Kansas Health Foundation and featured a KLC-influenced curriculum. McCray-Miller, chairwoman of the African American Coalition, and Camarena are alumni of the same KHF Fellows program. Martinez, who designed much of the program and facilitated it, is an alumna of KLC's faculty development initiative, as is McCray-Miller.

The effort, organizers say, reflects the common ground that Africans Americans and Hispanics in Wichita have when it comes to leadership and the need to develop a new generation of individuals with the capacity to mobilize others inside and outside their respective communities.

In that spirit, participants from both communities worked collaboratively to support the development of each other's leadership projects during the program. "Two populations within our community found a way to work together and found benefit in the collaborating," McCray-Miller said.

The challenge going forward for the Community Leadership Development Project will be making the program sustainable and allowing for more emerging young African-American and Hispanic leaders to connect in the future. Organizers say they are in the process of developing partnerships to allow the program to be funded for additional classes.

Furthermore, Camarena says the leadership program could be only the first in line of projects that Wichita's African-American and Hispanic communities might work on together.

"We saw the importance of the collaborative effort being made by both communities," Camarena said. "It just reinforced the idea that we really wanted to continue doing collaborative projects."

Mark McCormick, former director of communications for the Kansas Leadership Center, contributed to this story.