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Leadership McLean County Attracts IWU Alumni

April 14, 2011

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – After graduation, many Illinois Wesleyan University alumni scatter all across the globe to live and work, but some end up coming back to the twin cities of Bloomington-Normal where they spent their college years.

Three alumni are employed locally. Melissa Beaver '93, is the director of marketing at Heritage Enterprises, and received a degree in business administration from IWU. Michael Jensen '96, is a management consultant at State Farm and received dual degrees in political science and sociology. Joann Yant '95, is a business analyst at State Farm, and received a history degree. Even though it has been nearly 20 years since they earned their degrees, the trio is still open to learning. They are taking a class through the McLean County Chamber of Commerce called Leadership McLean County (LMC).

According to the LMC website, the class was started in 1995, and is designed to develop community leaders by cultivating skills, awareness and engagement through intentional learning experiences. The yearlong program requires all of its members to attend leadership retreats every other Friday, attend a town council meeting and school board meeting in McLean County, volunteer for a local organization and complete a service project.

The bi-monthly sessions feature community-related themes such as Diversity Day, Agriculture Day, Education Day and Criminal Justice Day. Community leaders also speak at the sessions, sharing their personal leadership experiences. Many sessions include visiting locations such as the local jail, the coroner's office, and, most recently, Springfield, Ill., to tour the capital building.

After each session, LMC members are challenged to contemplate the leadership competencies discussed and to try and incorporate them into their professional roles and their own lives.

"We learned things we read about in books," said Jensen. "What we saw were real-life examples of challenges leaders face everyday. This experience has made these leadership challenges real. I have seen that no matter what you're doing or where you are, there are some core competencies to be a leader."

In December 2010, LMC members were divided into task forces to select a community service project. Beaver and her task force teamed up with the Boys and Girls Club of Bloomington-Normal to focus on the youth in the community and promote the organization.

“Our goal was to raise awareness about the Boys and Girls Club,” said Beaver. “We also wanted to improve the environment for the children that go there, so we were able to get a commercial grade pool table donated, as well as gently used Wii games and toys.”

Jensen’s task force worked with the Western Avenue Community Center in Bloomington to create a child-friendly reading space for students. The center is used for an after school program for elementary students Monday through Thursday.

“The space was very sterile with concrete walls and floors,” said Jensen. “We saw an opportunity to make a space where children would want to come and read instead of goofing around or playing on their phones.”

Recently, Jensen’s group finished their renovation project, which installed new window treatments, painted and carpeted the room and organized the books by the same type of classification system the elementary schools use.

Yant and her task force began working in January to create a marketing plan for Providing Access to Help (PATH) and the United Way 211, which will extend into next year.

As the program comes to a close, Beaver, Yant and Jensen reflect on the value of the LMC education. “Leadership McLean County has afforded us a glimpse into the areas of the community that we normally wouldn’t access,” said Beaver. “The point was to make us more aware of what the needs are in the community, where we can take advantage of leadership opportunities and how we can improve where we live.”

Yant adds that thanks to the LMC, she feels “more involved in the community and more knowledgeable about all aspects of the community.” Before LMC, she was hesitant to attend local meetings, nervous she was intruding on something official. Now, she says she realizes these events are open to the public and they encourage local input.

“The LMC is building a stronger and tighter community of people who want to make things better,” said Jensen who recommends the program to any community members who want to get involved, including future IWU graduates staying in the Bloomington-Normal community.

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