

Leadership Florida an indispensable experience for women seeking office



Diane Mack

VIEWPOINT

Jennifer Grove had no inkling of the particular challenges for public education in Miami's dense urban core, challenges produced both by poverty and a multitude of cultures. As Gulf Power Company's Community Development Manager, her program of work includes education, workforce development, and support of efforts that move citizens from poverty to prosperity. She knows well the degree of poverty and the challenges to education in Escambia County and Northwest Florida.

It was only when she took part in the Leadership Florida "class program" in 2014-2015 that Jennifer was exposed to perspectives on such issues not just in Miami but throughout the state. It was an invaluable experience, she says, "because it has provided me with resources it would have otherwise taken me years to build and greatly enhanced my depth of knowledge, which is crucial to my field of work."

Last month Jennifer and three other area members of Leadership Florida, along with a graduate of Connect Florida, spoke about the value and benefits of the two programs to members and guests of the Institute for Women in Politics of Northwest Florida (IWP).

The other speakers were Julie Shepard, General Counsel for the Institute for Human and Machine Cognition and one of the area's earliest participants in Leadership Florida; Bentina Chisolm Terry, Vice President for Customer Sales and Service at Gulf Power; Meghan McCarthy, Director of Community Health and Wellness for Baptist Health Care and Vice President of the IWP Board of Directors; and Hong Tran, Operations Services Director of the Heart and Vascular Institute at Baptist Health Care.

Leadership Florida is described on its website as "a statewide community of leaders working for a better Florida." Its core strength is "diversity—of opinion, age, gender, geography, skills, interests, experience, ethnicity, occupation, and political affiliation," and it prides itself on "our respect for and accessibility to one another and in our passion for Florida."

All of the Leadership Florida members who spoke praised the value of their experience for the knowledge and diverse connections it has brought to their workplaces—and continues to bring. Jennifer Grove is now chair of Leadership Florida's Northwest Regional Council, responsible for keeping the program relevant in the state's 22 westernmost counties. Moreover, graduates from Northwest Florida are bringing an understanding of our region's issues and perspectives to leaders in the rest of the state.

"While Leadership Florida, as an organization, doesn't ever advocate or lobby on any issue, the more opportuni-

ties those of us in Northwest Florida have to interact with leaders from throughout the state, the more likely they are to care about ALL of Florida, not just their interests," Jennifer says.

Created 35 years ago by the Florida Chamber of Commerce, Leadership Florida and Connect Florida, its counterpart for emerging leaders under 40 years of age, have graduated over 1,500 participants. Sixty-three have come from Escambia, Santa Rosa, and Okaloosa counties and 40% have been women, a far greater percentage than we find for women in elected office in the state (22% on average).

"Each year the two programs together receive from six to thirty-some applications from Northwest Florida," Jennifer says, "and on average three to nine are accepted. I would encourage anyone who is passionate about their community and their state to apply—and apply again if you don't make it the first time."

For women who aspire to elected office at the state level, we believe Leadership Florida is an indispensable experience. It is costly, but Jennifer Grove told us there are robust scholarships available. Applications for the 2017-2018 programs are due May 7. Detailed information and application forms are available at www.leadership-florida.org.

Diane Mack is a former Pensacola City Councilwoman and was the founding president of the Institute for Women in Politics of Northwest Florida. To inquire about membership in the Institute, email contact@iwpflorida.org.