DCLF celebrates 25 years of developing dynamic leaders

More than 700 people eager to become great leaders have participated in the Denver Community Leadership Forum (DCLF) over the past 25 years. However, attendees are often unprepared for what happens as they work through the program’s curriculum; for many the experience is more powerful than they could have anticipated.

Whether it is overcoming preconceived notions about fellow participants, identifying untapped skills or conquering the curriculum’s Outward Bound course, DCLF alumni emerge from the eight-month program changed.

“We’re really not teaching a person how to be a leader,” says Effley Brooks, director of DCLF from 2002 through 2008. “To me it’s just really creating a context in which each person can explore what makes sense in his or her life.” Often when people go through the sessions, which range from understanding concepts of leadership and learning how to run a meeting to thinking strategically and managing conflict, they clarify their sense of purpose, explains Louise Ninneman, who was DCLF director from 1991 to 2001 and returned to direct the program again in 2009.

“I think participants come to ask themselves, ‘What am I here to do and am I doing that? Am I contributing as much as I could?’ For some people, it gives them the courage to take a leap,” she says.

The remarkable success of the program hardly could have been envisioned back in 1984 when it began.

DCLF was conceived by the late civic leader John Parr and scholar Dave Chrislip after Parr had sparred over political issues one too many times with Joe Giron, founder of Brother’s Redevelopment Inc.

“John and Joe had been at odds with each other over a number of different community issues,” recalls Lisa Carlson, executive director of the Center for Public-Private Sector Cooperation and former director of DCLF. “Then they were sitting in a bar after an event and they started to chat. It was the first time they had talked face to face without it being a contentious issue, and they discovered that they really had a lot in common.”

Together Parr and Giron reached the conclusion that the years spent being disagreeable had been a monumental waste of time. They realized that if only they had known each other better and understood how to negotiate resolutions to difficult issues, they could have accomplished so much more.

At that same time, Chrislip was at the Kennedy School at Harvard, working on leadership issues with Joe Jaworski, founder of the American Leadership Forum, and for him the opportunity to help create a laboratory for nurturing leaders in Denver was simply golden.

The Piton Foundation funded the original program, which focused on issues confronting Lower Downtown. Among those in the inaugural class were Dick Fleming, president and CEO of the Greater Denver Chamber
of Commerce; David French, who at the time was developing the May D&F Tower; architectural principal Roz Schneider; the late Sister Mary Lucy Downey, an advocate for affordable housing; then-City Councilwoman Stephanie Foote; and 16 others from the public, private and nonprofit sectors of the city.

“At that time Lower Downtown was really suffering,” says Carlson, “so the objective was to get a group of people together who were personally invested in the area, but on all different sides of the issues.”

The early 1980s was also a time of upheaval in the field of leadership development. Top-down management styles of the 1950s, where small groups of people made decisions and imposed them on others, had been upended by the counterculture movement of the 1970s. But organizations were still searching for effective leadership models to take their place.

“In the 1980s there were a lot of new people at the table,” says Carlson. “They knew how to stop things from happening, but not how to collaborate to get things done.”

DCLF set out to define the characteristics of effective leaders, to create an environment conducive to collaborative decision making and problem solving, and to build leadership capacity in the community.

In the years since, Parr and Chrislip’s audacious brainchild has produced a remarkable legacy of innovative, effective leaders. Among them are Tom Strickland, chief of staff for Interior Secretary Ken Salazar and director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Class of 1985); U.S. Sen. Mark Udall (Class of 1986); Secretary of Interior Ken Salazar (Class of 1988); Christine Benero, president and CEO of Mile High United Way (Class of 1989); former Denver City Council members and civic leaders Susan Barnes Gelt (Class of 1993) and Happy Haynes (Class of 1987); Denise Delgado, director of Clinica Tepeyac (Class of 2003); Omar Jabara, senior director of communications for Newmont Mining Co. (Class of 2006); and dozens of others.

Udall recalls his DCLF classmates by name and credits many of them with opening his eyes to new ideas and different approaches to civic life. “It was a very powerful experience for me,” he says.

Not only did he expand his leadership potential tremendously, but he was also in the extraordinary position of being, as he put it, “a consumer of my own product.”

At the time, Udall was director of the Colorado Outward Bound School. In the DCLF class he found himself among all the other blindfolded rock climbers who had been fumbling their way up a cliff, struggling to reach the top. It was a chance for him to see the Outward Bound challenge from a decidedly different point of view.

“I can’t speak highly enough about DCLF,” says Udall. “It certainly gave me a sense of where I belonged in the community. And I learned that while we all have intrinsic leadership qualities, there is much we all can learn to become effective leaders.”

The program has evolved over the decades; its directors continue to change and adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of contemporary leaders.

“One of the themes Effley brought into the program was emotional intelligence,” says Ninneman. “A new piece I’m introducing this year is managing change.”

As DCLF celebrates its 25th anniversary, a group of alumni are undertaking “The Big Look at Leadership,” a project to identify challenges facing the Denver metro community and the skills and capacities leaders need to deal with them.

“We talk about how we can bridge the gap between the high-tech world and high touch. Leaders are going to have to learn how to finesse that to their advantage,” says Ninneman. “That’s going to be part of the future that’s both a real challenge and a real opportunity.”