



2010-11 Graduating Class of Greater Tucson Leadership: Front row – seated From left: Kim Bourn (Executive Director of GTL), Rob Stenson, Teresa Loy, Jill Burris, Sarah Martinez, Steven Eddy, Joey Pouliot, Beth Scott, Sean Myers, Marcy Euler; Back row – standing: Barbara Dolan, Emily Brott, Jeanette Mare, Berrett Stradford, Claudia Perchinelli, Michelle Marsh, Joseph Lodge; Not pictured: Romi Carrell Wittman, Iris Patte

Leadership Awakening

Greater Tucson Leadership Provides Vision to Change Communities

By Romi Carrell Wittman

I'm somewhat of a rare bird for these parts. I'm a native Tucsonan and a fifth-generation Arizonan.

My great-grandmother was born here when Arizona was still a territory. I grew up in a house out in the sticks – at Ina and La Cañada. This true native-daughter status of mine is somewhat of a distinction. You'd think I would have felt a deep connection to this area.

But I didn't. Beyond my circle of friends and family, I didn't feel any community connection. Worse, I had no idea how to foster one.

Until I went through the 2010-2011 Greater Tucson Leadership program.

Greater Tucson Leadership, a not-for-profit, nonpartisan organization, has been 30-plus years. While more than 800 graduates have taken part, it's still something of an unknown in Southern Arizona.

It serves as the only formal, local civic leadership organization that cultivates leaders with a leadership curriculum as well as education on issues facing Southern Arizona, such as education, government and health care. Class members attend one issue day a month.

Participants hear from community experts, learning about the history of the issue as well as major challenges. Students are encouraged to think about the issues from all sides.

Rob Stenson, general manager of Goodmans Interior Structures, is also a 2010-2011 graduate of the program.

"GTL was and is the awakening I was looking for," he said. "There is an entire community around me that I have complained about . . . politics, economics, laws. I got tired taking the easy road of complaining and wanted to learn how I can become a part of this amazing community."

Greater Tucson Leadership gave Stenson the confidence he

needed to contribute to the community in a meaningful way.

When asked what makes the organization unique, Kim Bourn, executive director, pointed to the dual focus on leadership and civic matters. "GTL helps grow our leadership . . . and creates collaborative action around challenges in Tucson," she said.

While the organization is growing – its incoming 2011-2012 class is its largest ever. – Board President Suzanne McFarlin hopes to raise its profile. "We know we're attracting good people to the program, but there are lots of people that don't know what we do," she said.

McFarlin aims to change that by aligning the organization with strategic community partners, with a mission that overlaps other community initiatives.

"The question is, who do we need to invite to the table to make the best program possible? The goal is to develop and foster leaders, but also contribute to the community."

Randy Accetta, faculty at the McGuire Center for Entrepreneurship at the University of Arizona Eller College of Management, said Greater Tucson Leadership has made a difference in the community.

"Tucson would be much the worse for wear without GTL," Accetta said. "GTL grads work in local government, local corporations, small business, the schools, the UA, the military. GTL grads like state leader Jack Jewett and Tucson Medical Center's Michael Duran have had an unquantifiable large impacts on their community after participating in GTL. Every city needs its citizens to pitch in and help. GTL provides an opportunity for people to learn how to do that here."

He gave as an example the urban fitness phenomenon that has helped revitalize downtown, started in part by Greater Tucson Leadership alumni, including Jannie Cox leading the way with Meet Me At Maynards.

"It's not just that 500 people a week meet to go for a walk or a run. It's economic development, intergenerational health and wellness, urban revitalization – all because GTL grads had a good idea and worked to implement it."

Accetta said what he learned through the program encouraged him to create running events downtown. "GTL has inspired me to look for solutions to the problems that I see and given me an awareness of the regional network that can help implement those solutions."

Jeannette Mare, executive director of the not-for-profit Ben's Bells, called the program "a really incredible community building experience."

"It helped me create new partnerships for Ben's Bells, and I learned skills that have enabled me to grow this organization," she said. "The connections have been vital."

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PHOTO: KRIS HANNING

Fearless Leaders: Linda Welter Cohen (left) and Kerry Stratford (right)

Each year the governing board of Greater Tucson Leadership recognizes an individual who has shown unsurpassed commitment and dedication to the Tucson community, someone who has bettered our town through their leadership.

Two Tucson businesswomen were selected for this year's Tucson Leader Award: Linda Welter Cohen and Kerry Stratford, principals of The Caliber Group.

The Caliber Group offers brand marketing, public relations and interactive services. Cohen is CEO and Stratford is president.

Cohen and Stratford have dedicated hundreds of hours to local not-for-profit and community causes throughout the past 20 years.

"We have served many clients and causes, said Cohen. "This experience has enabled us to know the people, history, culture and needs of this community."

When asked to get involved, they jump at the chance.

"We help in areas where we can have an impact," Cohen said. "By helping these causes, we are doing our part to make our community a better place for our children and future generations." She added that communities with quality educational opportunities, business opportunities, vibrant arts and culture scenes and other programs and services attract and retain talented people and businesses.

To that end, The Caliber Group is a major supporter of Imagine Greater Tucson, the Tucson Festival of Books, Southern Arizona Community Foundation, Tucson Values Teachers and the Ronald McDonald House, among other causes and programs.

Stratford said supporting community causes is time consuming, but highly rewarding. "Instead of complaining about what's wrong in our community, we step in and do something about it."

That's precisely why Greater Tucson Leadership honored Cohen and Stratford with its Tucson Leadership Award, for their vision, dedication and long-standing commitment to the people of Southern Arizona.

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