

LEADING THE WAY

Badger High School's Leadership Dynamics program cultivates and trains tomorrow's leaders.

BY LESA KNOLLENBERG

Walk into Badger High School in Lake Geneva and you'll feel the palpable energy. But down a few hallways, in Leadership Dynamics class, there is a different kind of energy. On an early January day, Jim Gebhardt's students are gathered around a long table to continue a conversation. They are discussing the height of a playground structure. "It doesn't need to be that high. The kids are only this tall," one student gestures to make her point. The rest laugh and continue to brainstorm. They are working on their class project, a future playground for the nearby Child Advocacy Program. They are taking turns listening and theorizing. Gebhardt just smiles.

The Leadership Dynamics program has a rich history. What started as a program to help students with public speaking and connecting them to the community has evolved into a dynamic entity that changes the community and the students alike. Each year, the student makeup is different; the personalities, talents, opportunities drive the dynamics of the group. It's fluid.

Gebhardt and Jenny Oomens are the current co-coordinators of the Leadership Dynamics program. But they are quick to point out that they aren't the only contributors; although they may handle administration and paperwork, the program's success lies in the creativity and

energy of the others involved. Teachers, past participants and community members all contribute to the momentum of the program. It's a strong draw for those interested in sharing important values and morals; due to the nature of the setting, staff is able to interact with students on a more personal level and develop a strong rapport.

The program has two components: yearlong classes and one-week camps held each summer. The students, of course, like to talk about the camp the most. It's a week of fun and inadvertent learning, especially for incoming freshmen. There are rope-climbing courses, leap of faith exercises and encouragement from surprising sources.

"I decided to attend the camp as a freshman because people told me about the networking. It took me out of my circle, and I've made friends that I wouldn't have otherwise. We still talk even though they're in college now," says Tyler Butler, a four-year veteran of the program.

For twins Rory and Randy Shine, there have been other surprises along the way. "I made the decision to be in the Leadership Dynamics program because I wanted to be a better leader," says Randy. "One of the things I learned is that the key to being a good leader is making everybody feel important. The key is utilizing everybody." Rory agrees that he learned about the subtlety of group dynamics. "Sometimes it's just seeing when you need to take charge to help focus the group's effort in a certain direction."

Oomens and Gebhardt often tell the kids that this program should be called "Team Dynamics" rather than "Leadership Dynamics." Butler, a senior, says that for him, that is the lesson that stands out the most. "The most important thing I've learned is to be a leader and a team member. I've learned to be part of the group and not have to control each situation."

This skill — creating a team that pursues a common goal rather than success for each person — is unfortunately becoming a rare commodity in the working world. "We are trying to train tomorrow's leaders," says Gebhardt. As such, the program's objectives will make very good employees: developing life skills, affirming the strength in diversity, and becoming catalysts for positive community interaction.

It all starts with the mission statement: "The Leadership Dynamics Mission is to be an environment that will inspire young adults to think, believe and act for the betterment of themselves, others and the enrichment of their community." The program is predicated on the idea that teenagers who attend the summer camps and take the classes will become more invested in their community, learn how to collaborate and appreciate the value of civic contributions. And it's working.

Take Leadership Dynamics One, the first summer camp centered on the role of an individual in a group. Billed as a great way

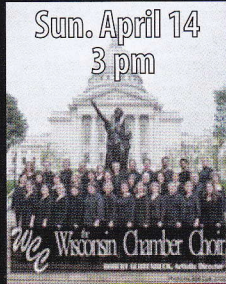


LEFT: Jim Gebhardt and Jenny Oomens work with students in a Leadership Dynamics class at Lake Geneva's Badger High School. ABOVE: The program includes a one-week camp held each summer at Badger High School. During the sessions, students master exercises that focus on team building, problem-solving and leadership skills.

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to jumpstart freshman year, the camp has a focus on goal setting, listening and discussion techniques, and problem solving. Participants also present reading programs at local daycare centers, where they learn a little bit about themselves as well as others.

Leadership Dynamics Two delves deeper into group diversity, life balance and work ethic using activities such as a hike on the shore of Geneva Lake and a nocturnal adventure, which helps students understand group dynamics and how our reflexes react to lack of sleep. They use their problem-solving skills to coordinate fundraising projects such as a car wash, which raises money for the Walworth County Adult Special Olympics.

Leadership Dynamics Three builds on the growth of the earlier curriculum and begins to focus on the apex of the program, Senior Leadership. Students begin to think about possibilities for their senior project and work on skills such as networking and communicating in the business world using email and letter writing that doesn't include "LOL." As a corollary to the ropes courses, the goal isn't just getting yourself across the course but ensuring that your team is successful as well.

Senior Leadership is where it all comes together. Using the lessons learned from previous years, Senior Leadership students choose a project that will benefit the community. This includes developing, planning, fund-raising, and moving through the tension and uncertainty that any civic project can create. It's a yearlong focus and by the end of the project, students have learned, among other things, to speak in front of groups, call local businesses to solicit help and collaborate with community leaders and volunteers. A few recent senior projects:

- Students restored the memorial garden, "In Loving Memory," at the Samuel Donian Wetland Nature Preserve at Brookwood Middle School. The Class of 1999's restoration and preservation continues with the option of purchasing plaques to honor loved ones.
- In 2010, Leadership Dynamics seniors raised money to build a 40-foot, three-sided climbing tower at the Eagle's Nest Adventure Center in Elkhorn. Their goal was to give the community a place where

physical challenge can meet fears head on; they named it "The Beast." The Beast is now used by Badger High School and other community groups to teach life-time skills like goal setting, perseverance, teamwork and self-confidence.

- Improving the Veteran's Memorial in Library Park proved to be a lesson in patience, team-building and democracy for the class of 2009. This project's goal was to improve the memorial to reflect its due reverence. After months of planning, fundraising and support from veterans and community leaders alike, the project was in jeopardy. Last-minute scrambling and City Council meetings gave the students a new appreciation for civic pride.
- The class of 2002 published a book created solely by students. The pictorial includes photographs, poems and geographic information about Lake Geneva to highlight the area's uniqueness and commemorate its path.

Because a main tenet of the Leadership Dynamics program is collaboration with the community, it's no surprise that area service groups are advocates for the program. With the help of local service groups and area businesses, senior projects take on lives of their own. Organizations and businesses like the Jaycees, Rotary Club, Big Foot and Lake Geneva Lions' Clubs, Lioness' Clubs, Piggly Wiggly, plus innumerable volunteers, have supported the program over the years. Local community leaders recognize the benefits of working with students in the program.

"We've always supported the work that the Leadership Dynamics Program does," says Steven Lois, member of the Lake Geneva Lions' Club. "It's remarkable to see the skills — both personally and professionally — that students gain through the program. With their senior projects, they learn about leadership and group dynamics, and that part of life is adversity as well. It's a function of the leadership at Badger High School that this program is significantly successful."

For staff of the Leadership Dynamics program, there isn't much time for accolades. The next senior project is just around the corner. It's often difficult to find the right



opportunity that will combine the resources of the community and the students during an academic year. "Finding the right project is 90 percent of the struggle," says Gebhardt. "We learn along the way." As John F. Kennedy said, "Leadership and learning are

indispensable to each other." At Badger High School, it is a powerful combination.

For more information on the Leadership Dynamics program, go to badgerleadership-dynamics.com. ▲

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