

## READERS FORUM

## Leadership Oklahoma: 25 years, 1,221 grads

BY HOWARD BARNETT

For those of us in the early classes of Leadership Oklahoma, it is a little daunting to acknowledge that this wonderful organization is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year.

For those who have not had the pleasure of being exposed to LOK, as we call it, each year Leadership Oklahoma brings together 52 leaders from around our great state and for nine months takes them to different cities in Oklahoma and gives them an amazing education on what makes Oklahoma work and what it takes for them to be a part of shaping the future for our state.

I was honored to be a member of Class II. It was one of the best, most rewarding experiences of my life. Not only did I learn a lot about Oklahoma, but I made a number of lasting friendships and became part

**MAKING A DIFFERENCE**

**Howard Barnett:** Leadership Oklahoma is making Oklahoma a better place to live, work and raise our families.

of an indispensable network.

LOK has graduated 1,221 Oklahomans, most of whom remain here and contribute to their communities and our state. Among our graduates are one governor, two lieutenant governors, two congressmen and four tribal chiefs. Eighty-eight percent of our graduates cite their LOK experience as having increased their civic involvement.

Leadership Oklahoma makes a difference in our state by arming

citizens who are already leaders — in their business or employment, their industry or in their community — with the tools and the knowledge to be even more effective in their giving back to their community and state.

After their LOK experience, 33 percent of our graduates have served on an appointed board or commission. Most have joined new nonprofit boards and many have risen to lead those boards.

After I graduated from Class II, I joined the board of LOK and later served as chairman of that board. As a past chairman, I still serve on the LOK board. It is one of the proudest accomplishments on my resume.

As a graduate of LOK, I have a network of leaders around the state on whom I can call for help and support. It is the only organization in Oklahoma in which all of the

members — all 1,221 of us — share a common experience. This gives the network great strength. When I call someone in Woodward, for example, who I do not know but who is a member of LOK, there is an instant connection and even trust.

Not only do our graduates strengthen their communities and our state by serving on appointed and nonprofit boards, but almost 10 percent actually ran for elective office after LOK. We have a number of members who are sitting or former legislators. We believe that their LOK experience has and will help them to understand the needs of all Oklahomans. In their class, they and the other class members are exposed to the diversity of our state. Each class is carefully selected to balance such factors as gender, geographic location and profession. This makes the class discussions

very rich and lets class members learn from each other. And as a result, we have graduates in 164 communities in our state.

Finally, LOK is also about teaching young people about our state through our Youth Leadership Oklahoma program. Each summer, 52 high school seniors come together for a week and get what amounts to a mini-LOK experience by traveling the state and learning about Oklahoma. Since 1999, 563 students from 203 different schools have graduated from this program.

In short, Leadership Oklahoma is making Oklahoma a better place to live, work and raise our families.

Happy 25th anniversary, Leadership Oklahoma.

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Howard Barnett is president of Oklahoma State University-Tulsa.