

PLTI places its graduates in Teddy Roosevelt's arena

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If you've noticed a new crop of leaders popping up in the community, the Parent Leadership Training Institute is one of the biggest reasons why.

By now, I hope you've heard of PLTI, as the program has captured widespread attention and we've reported on it extensively here at the Sanford News. Basically, the program, a first of its kind here in Maine, is a 20-week course that helps moms and dads and relatives and other adults enhance their understanding of how government, the media and policy-making work, so that they can become leaders and advocates for children in our community.

The Sanford School Department and Strategies for a Stronger Sanford lead the program, which is made possible through a Nellie Mae Grant. PLTI is working here in Sanford — in fact, earlier this year, Elaine Zimmerman, the founder and executive director of the Connecticut Commission on Children, and Patty Keckeisen, a national PLTI team member and consultant, visited Sanford to report that the graduates of Sanford's first class have performed above the program's national average.

PLTI is divided into four phases — a retreat, at which parents and facilitators introduce themselves and develop their mission; two 10-week sessions; and a community project. Classes are currently held at the Eastside Acres Community Building at 127 Emery Street. On Wednesday, Dec. 10, I attended one of those classes alongside fellow journalist Tammy Wells, of the Journal Tribune. We were there as guests to discuss with the parents ways that they can use the media to communicate their ideas and endeavors through writing letters to the editor, guest columns and press releases.

I enjoyed my visit, and I hope the PLTI students did as well. Whenever I'm invited to speak at certain classes or events, I give much thought beforehand as to what I should say but also wonder how I'll possibly fill the time I've been allotted to speak. Then I get there, speak my first word and, the next thing I know, my visit has passed in the blink of an eye. I forget sometimes that I have the gift of gab because Mom kissed the Blarney Stone in Ireland while six weeks pregnant with me back in 1971. For the record, though, I'm a good listener and am much more interested in what others have to say — indeed, during my visit to the PLTI class last week, I was consistently impressed and intrigued by the parents' questions and opinions and descriptions of the projects they're pursuing in the community. Some of those projects, for example, involve teaching sign language to foster communication with the deaf or hard-of-hearing; producing a play that depicts the dangers and drawbacks of parents not spending enough time with their children; helping and empowering young people who have been sexually abused or exploited; assisting teachers with their complex, time-consuming task of individually assessing their students; creating handbooks to help mothers and fathers understand and keep up with the routines of their child's school day; fostering volunteerism among local youths; establishing a "time bank," through which people can offer their skills and talents; creating a rent-to-own initiative that reinforces the principle that a home is good for kids; and more. There are two PLTI parents, for instance, who are working toward establishing a parent-teacher organization at the Sanford Junior High School.

This is great stuff. It's obvious that parents who complete the PLTI course are newly confident, focused and energized. A PLTI graduate who stands before a city official at a meeting or a crowd at an event is credible and respected. He or she is a parent transformed. I've seen it first-hand. Local parent Mary Neault was a student in the first PLTI course held in Sanford. For her community project, she spearheaded a successful career fair at Sanford High School earlier this year. Last spring, she served as host for the presentation that Zimmerman and Keckeisen presentation at City Hall. And now? She's a Phase I PLTI facilitator, alongside Kristen Wiegand, the school department's community collaboration coordinator and PLTI site coordinator, and Frank Catalano, the pastor of Evergreen Covenant Church.

During last week's class, we discussed the biggest obstacle for those who are training to become public leaders and advocates. That would be public speaking, of course. It's often said that the two biggest fears in life are death and public speaking. This makes delivering eulogies especially difficult, I would imagine. When it comes to delivering other speeches and presentations, though, there's one way to overcome a fear of public speaking, and that is to speak publicly often. Doing so gets easier each time. I say this with experience, as someone whose legs shook, whose throat ran dry and whose vision blurred the first time he had to stand before hundreds and try to say something worth all of their while.

One of the PLTI students told Tammy and me that she is filled with questions, ideas and feedback when she attends meetings but can never quite build up the comfort and confidence to stand at the microphone and speak. For her, the good news is that she's more than half way to where she wants to be. By virtue of enrolling in PLTI, she has stepped into the arena where questions are asked and ideas and input are expressed. It's an arena of which President Teddy Roosevelt once spoke. I referred to Teddy's quote at last week's class and wished I had it on hand to recite verbatim.

Now I have my chance, thanks to Goodreads.com.

"It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat."

The graduates and current parents in PLTI are in the arena. If in the future, you'd like to join them, give Kristen Wiegand a call. She can be reached at (207) 608-1620 or kwiegand@sanford.org. You also can check out Sanford Community PLTI on Facebook or click on the "Community" link at the school department's website, www.sanford.org.

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