

A COMMITMENT OF THE HEART

Partnership for the Future uses a holistic approach to life skills and business education.

by Michael J. Stott

One of Richmond's finest and least talked about attributes is the quiet philanthropy that permeates the metropolitan landscape. While residents can tick off individual names with ease, there is an unending and unrestrained flow of goodwill, works and capital that flows from corporate coffers as well.

One such enterprise is the Partnership for the Future (PFF), started in 1995 by Markel Corporation Chairman and CEO Alan Kirshner, whose original goal was to provide students of limited resources the tools they needed to successfully navigate the college

admissions maze. Today Markel has enlisted the likes of Bon Secours Richmond Health System, Capital One Services Inc., S&K Famous Brands Inc., Philip Morris and more than 70 other business and business patron sponsors. The intern/enrichment program provides summer jobs and employment life skills to qualifying high school students.

With the help of guidance counselors, PFF identifies students during their sophomore year. After a very competitive application review process, both students and sponsoring partners commit to participate in the program for three



From left to right: Kim Dean, PFF director of programs; Kandis Lawrence, PFF student; Shanza Isom, PFF program coordinator; Valerie Brown, PFF class of 2002; with PFF Founder Alan Kirshner (center), CEO and chairman of Markel Corporation.

consecutive summers. Students work four days a week for seven weeks in internships at sponsoring companies. Each Friday they spend time in personal development sessions, coordinated by the PFF staff, covering topics from business ethics to dining etiquette, as well as workplace preparation, the college application process and the transition to college and community.

Each student is assigned a PFF staff member who mentors and visits them to keep the lines of communication open and to ensure that the students' needs are being met. PFF is not just a program to help the indigent, a sympathetic handout or an afterthought of some Great Society ideal, but a successful, vital and mutually beneficial enterprise that serves as a model for future PFF programs.

Business sponsors make two commitments to the students:

- (1) Sponsors pay minimum wage the first summer with a 50-cent-per-hour increase each of the next two summers based on satisfactory performance; and
- (2) Sponsors make a tax-deductible charitable contribution of \$1,000 per student per summer to PFF to be held in a separate account to provide a scholarship match.

This summer more than 125 students served Richmond-area organizations in important ways. In fact, Tiana May helped Bon Secours win the 2004 PFF Pacesetter Award. Capitalizing on May's fluency in Spanish, Bon Secours assigned her to Care-A-Van, its mobile health clinic that meets the medical needs of Richmond's burgeoning Hispanic population.

During her internship at Virginia Geotechnical, Oshae Berry received an introduction to the engineering profession that was simply unavailable in school. "We are delighted to have the opportunity to make a difference in a teen's life and impact the future of the community," says President Ann Samford.

Guidance counselor Portia James, from Richmond's John Marshall High School, is ecstatic with the opportunities PFF provides. "I want as many of my students that can to participate in PFF because it opens doors that our students would not otherwise be able to access," says James. "It is so important for students to experience the real world and see that their performance in school directly relates to their future successes."

From the start 10 years ago, the results of what PFF refers to as a "commitment of the heart" are impressive. They include a graduation rate in excess of 80 percent, college entrance for 100 percent of the program's graduates, an increase in SAT scores of 198 points after attendance in PFF's privately funded SAT prep classes, awards from the Greater Richmond Chamber of Commerce and increased applications to the state's premier colleges and universities.

As PFF enters its second decade, Alan Kirshner is eyeing national expansion. Obvious initial markets are cities with ties to

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Richmond. Kirshner has already enticed Mike Rozenberg of Shand Morahan Company Inc., Markel's Chicago office, to begin a similar program. He also envisions a broadening and deepening of the program, an extension of corporate soul that is essential to the survival and success of today's emerging workforce.

Recent graduate Lindsey King would second that emotion: "Partnership for the Future is the greatest program for college-bound students. It thrills me to know that I am part of such a powerful movement. It has proven to me that knowledge is power."

Kirshner, always one to take the long view, observes, "We have found no greater way than PFF to invest our time and money in the community. It costs so little to hire students, and we gain so much from their time with us."

Talk about corporate responsibility.