

Jo Ellen Carson
is the executive
director of
Leadership
Winston-Salem.



J. SINCLAIR PHOTO

“WE'RE LOOKING FOR DIVERSITY IN ALL WAYS. DEMOGRAPHIC DIVERSITY, LIFE EXPERIENCE DIVERSITY, AND THE DIVERSITY ACROSS EMPLOYMENT SECTORS...”

-JO ELLEN CARSON

CALLED TO LEAD

Leadership W-S aims for diversity

It might seem like magic the way Leadership Winston-Salem builds lifelong bonds among participants—relationships that benefit the Winston-Salem community on many different levels for many years to come.

But the truth is that each class over the past 30 years has been strategically selected with an assortment of leaders who are diverse in every way “to continue igniting community leadership,” says Jo Ellen Carson, who will have been executive director of Leadership Winston-Salem for 10 years this June.

“We’re looking for leaders from all employment sectors, all walks of life; individuals who have already made a commitment to the community, who are already involved in community in some way, or who have come to the point where they can now commit to becoming involved.

“We’re looking for diversity in all ways,” she continues. “Demographic diversity, life experience diversity, and the diversity across employment sectors gives participants an opportunity to form new relationships with people they might not otherwise have met or understood their work.”

Recruitment is under way for the Class of 2016, and Carson encourages interested community leaders to check out the website LeadershipWS.org and register to attend an upcoming information session on April 21 to learn more about the program, its requirements, its local impact, and how to apply.

A selection committee comprised of alumni, board members, and Carson will review the class applications, and there are always more people who apply than there are slots available. It’s not unusual to apply more than once before being accepted into the program.

“So much of what the selection focuses on is the right mix of all those perspectives and diversity in the class,” she says. “That’s what creates this very powerful mini-community within the larger community. We want people who are open to other perspectives, even if they might not agree with it. You want that candid dialog rather than debate in an environment of trust and mutual respect.”

Applicants must be committed to attending the program, which includes a two-day overnight opening retreat and a full day once a month for the next eight months and up to eight hours of work outside of class.

“Every single minute is planned with a purpose in mind, and they build on the one before them,” Carson says. “And each person’s agenda coming into this program needs to be focused on the greater good.”

Each class is comprised of 56 participants, who form teams of eight members each, and the teams work with seven nonprofit agencies during the year. Tuition is \$2,500 for the year, and partial tuition assistance is available for those with financial need.

What stands out for Carson is the “quality of the community that’s formed when these leaders from all walks of life come together and begin to listen and think differently, even serve differently as a result of their Leadership Winston-Salem experience.

“It transforms those who put their whole selves in it.”

—KATHY NORCROSS WATTS

This article is the 11th in a yearlong series on Leadership Winston-Salem as the program celebrates its 30th anniversary. For more info on applying for the class, go to leadershipws.org.

