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HOW LWS GRADUATE TRAE COTTON IS PAYING IT FORWARD.

“What does it mean if your neighbor is hungry?”

Leadership Winston-Salem brought that question to life for Dr. Trae Cotton, vice chancellor for student affairs at Winston-Salem State University.

During his normal daily routine, Cotton doesn't typically come face to face with the community's needs. Leadership Winston-Salem's Flagship Program gave him an in-depth, behind-the-scenes look at the community—and a different perspective.

“I didn't see the amount of homelessness that exists in this community; I didn't see the amount of hunger—the number of kids K-12 that will eat two times a day while they're in school who won't have a meal at home,” he says. “Social Services Day highlighted that for me and drove home the fact that if we don't know about a problem, there's nothing we can do about it.”

Cotton had applied to LWS because he was new to the area and wanted to learn ways he could impact the community.

“I came to understand a long time ago that a lot of people paved the way for me to be here today, whether they were teachers or civil-right activists,” Cotton says, and he

wants to pay it forward. “I need to try to give it to somebody else.”

His nine-month-long Leadership Winston-Salem education showed him how to do that.

“[The program] has genuinely impacted my life and has changed me,” he says. “By the time you're done, you're tired, but you really have this commitment to yourself, your classmates, the program, and a commitment to the community to really try to be a change agent, to really try to make a difference.”

Leadership Winston-Salem graduates are challenged to be stewards of their community, and Cotton took that message to heart: He's been named board member of the year for Big Brothers Big Sisters; he is vice president of education and audience development for Piedmont Opera; he's a board member of the Winston-Salem Transit Authority; and he serves on the executive committee

of The Forsyth Promise, a cradle-to-career education initiative. He also serves on Leadership Winston-Salem's Social Services committee and Program Council.

A survey of the Class of 2012 one year after its Flagship Program experience indicated a 117 percent increase in board/committee involvement, according to LWS

Executive Director Jo Ellen Carson. The program builds connections in the community that help address issues, such as hunger and educational attainment.

“No one person's going to resolve [these problems]; no one sector's going to resolve it,” Cotton says. “But just imagine if everybody did some ‘thing,’ we could deal with the hunger problem. If everybody did some ‘thing,’ we could increase the educational attainment of all of our kids. If everybody did some ‘thing,’ we could help

one more person get back on their feet.”

“If everybody did some ‘thing.’”

—KATHY NORCROSS WATTS

“IF WE DON'T KNOW ABOUT A PROBLEM, THERE'S NOTHING WE CAN DO ABOUT IT.”

—DR. TRAE COTTON

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