

Phoenix Project unites colleges, nonprofits

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Body

Jun. 29--PETERSBURG -- The Phoenix Project returned to the city earlier this month to kick off its third summer of working with nonprofit organizations in the city.

The 30 students from several colleges and universities throughout the state began their six-weeks of work with a reception dinner in the Pathways building that was attended by many of the people with whom they will work.

The Phoenix Project's goal is to establish links between Virginia colleges and universities and distressed communities.

The pilot program for the project began over the summer of 2006 with a group of students from the College of William and Mary. Since then, there have been several groups working with Petersburg during breaks in the academic year.

"When we first heard of the Phoenix Project, we had no idea what it meant and where we would find ourselves in it," said Petersburg Mayor Annie M. Mickens. As each group of students showed the city and its nonprofits what they are capable of doing, Mickens said, most of the wariness has subsided.

"We're extremely pleased that the fear has been relieved tremendously," she said.

This summer, after a 2 1/2 week academic portion at Virginia State University, the students will work on 25 projects with area nonprofits.

"This year, we had 50 project requests," said Greg Werkheiser, executive director of the Phoenix Project.

The list was pared down to what they could do with their time frame and manpower, and covers a wide range of organizations.

"Each year we cast a wide net in the community," said Marion Werkheiser, Phoenix Project associate director.

Their summer projects include working with the Petersburg Department of Social Services to develop a marketing plan for recruitment of foster parents, analyzing data related to teen pregnancy for the United Way and Petersburg Health Department, suggesting changes in how to reduce teen pregnancy and also researching steps to make Pathways an accredited technical school.

They will also be working with facilitators, such as Deboarah Coleman, a local businesswoman who has been working with the Phoenix Project since its inception.

Sarah Curtis

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"I'm hoping to coach them through some basic project management skills," she said. "I think it is a wonderful thing to be thinking ahead to future leaders."

They will also learn accounting skills. Celia Broadus, who is knowledgeable in accounting, said it is important for nonprofit leaders to have financial skills.

"I'm looking forward to giving them the real experience of working for a nonprofit," she said.

Along with gaining the experience, it is the hope of the Phoenix Project that the students will contribute to the improvement of Petersburg through working with the city. Mickens looks forward to the help to restore the city.

"We're in the business of changing those statistics that brought you here," she said.

In the fall, the Phoenix Project will also launch programs similar to Petersburg along U.S. Route 1 in southern Fairfax and northern Prince William counties as well as in the East End of Newport News.

For the summer session, Boehringer Ingelheim Chemicals Inc. funded \$10,000 in student scholarships for the Petersburg program.

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