Community Learning:
Texas comes alive to collective leadership. Page 3.
“There has been deep learning [at the community learning exchange], it has really helped people to see things differently and to take back home a skill set they can readily employ in their environments.”

— Francisco Guajardo, executive director, Llano Grande Center for Research and Development.

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The founders of Roca, the Kellogg Leadership for Community Change (KLCC) site in Chelsea, Mass., never intended to impact the lives of people living as far away as rural South Texas. Their focus has always been local. But thanks to the second Community Learning Exchange (CLE), which took place at Roca in November, the organization’s experience in serving the needs of diverse immigrant populations is now helping to spur change in South Texas.

“In Chelsea, things are more diverse than here, but we have some of the same [immigration issues],” says Mark Cantu, a fifth and sixth grade language arts teacher from South Texas who attended the Roca CLE session. “Thinking, listening to [immigrants’] stories [and] seeing videos, all [of] that helped me to see the effective needs of my own students outside of school. I began to pay more attention than I had in the past. Now when I hear a child saying, ‘I’m here with an aunt and my mother is back in Mexico,’ I realize what that means to a child’s life and their performance as a student.”

Following on the success of the inaugural convening of the

Learning Exchange
Expands its Reach
Sharing knowledge from Massachusetts to Texas

By Anneliese M. Bruner

The South Texas contingent at the Roca-hosted community learning exchange took home a new skill set as well as a rededication to education policy advocacy.
CLE last spring (which included local participants as well as visitors from other parts of the country), Francisco Guajardo, Llano Grande Center’s executive director, invited students from the University of Texas-Pan American’s Project Lead program to join him at the Roca CLE gathering. Guajardo is a professor of educational leadership at UT-Pan American. Project Lead is designed to fast track new leaders into roles as school principals and administrators.

“[The teachers] had little or no connection [to KLCC], but were introduced during the summer to collective leadership around policy advocacy work on the [Texas school] accountability system,” Guajardo says. Three of the Project Lead participants wanted to learn more about the process, he says, so they chose to attend the Roca conference. Afterwards, they described the experience to Guajardo as “transforming for them.”

One of the practices that Cantu immediately introduced into his classroom was peacemaking circles. He arrived back in Texas from Boston on a Sunday, and by that Monday had identified an opportunity to jump right in and start using it. “We had taken a practice standardized test and wanted to reflect on how the kids did after they found out their scores to get feedback in a structured way.” Since then, Cantu says his class has held about four circles.

From its beginning, Guajardo has had the opportunity to observe CLE’s strong potential to influence people outside of the KLCC circle. He cites the participation by a team of three educators from Brooklyn, N.Y., who attended the South Texas session and came back for the session in Chelsea. “Interestingly, some people are seeing [CLE] as an essential part of their own professional development work,” Guajardo says. “[The ladies from Brooklyn] also plan to participate in the third session in New Mexico early next year. It has helped people see things differently and take back home a skill set they can readily employ in their environments.”

Guajardo also sees another valuable step being taken in CLE’s development. “It’s getting to the point where we can sell this as a viable but also transforming professional development experience to practitioners, educators or organizational workers as an enterprise for cultivating social change,” he says. This can happen in either dramatic or subtle ways. The Brooklyn CLE participants have seen a marked uptick in the number of parents becoming actively involved in the school lives of their children, a development they credit to tactics they were inspired to employ as a result of their CLE experience. In South Texas, Cantu’s work has taken on added focus. He had already begun working around educational advocacy and policy issues, but now he’s working with new tools. He helped to organize a policy seminar on December 1 that brought in people from around the state and across the country. Guajardo says, “He’s a middle school English teacher who got a lot of energy from the learning exchange. He’d been working [in this field], but this has been an additional motivator.”

For more information about the community Learning Exchange, contact the Center for Ethical Leadership at: info@ethicalleadership.org.
For victims of domestic violence, home can be an especially tough place during the holidays. "It's one of the most violent times of the year," says 22-year veteran Michigan State Trooper Maurice Burton. "Families experience a lot of mental and psychological stress [due to societal pressures]." This perfect tinderbox for trouble often leads to women and children needing to escape the home for the safety of a safe haven. This escape is where their paths may cross with Trooper Burton's.

Since 1998, Trooper Burton has been involved with the Boys and Girls Club of Benton Harbor (BGCBH) and has worked closely with youth club members who are also part of the KLCC fellowship at BGCBH. Part of his involvement has been educating teens on violence prevention and domestic abuse issues in conjunction with the Young Men with a Purpose, Ladies of Excellence and the Youth Crime Watch initiatives. In partnership with director of youth programs Liji Hanny, the young people selected a gift-giving campaign as a way to give back to their local community, and felt that it would be especially valuable to help domestic violence victims living in the local safe shelters. "In partnership with the state police department, Trooper Burton came to speak with the kids [before the shopping trip] to help them understand the impact of what they [would be] doing and the impact of domestic violence on families," Hanny says.

The exchange with Burton allowed the young people to open up about the struggles some have had in their own lives and highlighted the positive impact BGCBH has had on their lives over the years. "The main focus at BGC is to give an ear to kids and open the dialogue back and forth [between youth and adults]," Burton says.

One young man who has experienced firsthand the pain of living in a home situation where he had to contend with difficult issues is DeAnthony Govain. Being part of this effort has had special meaning for him. "It was basically that I used to have the same problem. I was in a house that was going through the domestic violence thing, and no one was there for me. It made me feel better to help someone have the things I have now," he says. Burton believes that the lesson of looking outsides yourself applies not only to the young people, but also to others who may be having a hard time coping with the pressures of the holiday season. He was inspired by the spirit of the young people, some of whom went to the safe homes to play with the children. Some even approached him later to say that they got a good feeling from doing something for someone else. "They enjoyed giving. It's a good understanding for them to have at that young age. You always feel there's hope, it keeps me going when I know someone else is getting up."
When Roca Program Coordinator Victor Jose Santana learned that he would serve as the local lead in organizing the second Community Learning Exchange, he realized it was a unique opportunity to share what he and his colleagues have learned in their work with the diverse immigrant community of Chelsea, Mass., diverse immigrant community. As the coordinator of Roca’s Immigrant and Refugee Initiative, Santana wanted to introduce others to the tools that helped him create a successful program while also sharing the larger ideals of youth-adult partnership and collective leadership.

“I took the collective leadership framework and used that as a guide [in programming what to share],” he says. Santana wanted to make sure that even those who might not be dealing with immigration issues in their communities would be able to get something out of the learning exchange. Not only did he and his colleagues want the session to be full of useful information, they also wanted it to be fun. “There was technical and practical training balanced out with the Roca Arts Café, where youth showcased their talents through poetry, singing, acting and playing instruments,” he says.

One aspect of the technical training was showcasing how Roca works with different community partners. Roca belongs to a network of organizations that make recommendations to the Massachusetts governor regarding the use of technology as an organizing tool in support of policy initiatives. One of the network partners provided a training session at the Community Learning Exchange using the recent campaign of President-elect Barack Obama as a case study. The trainer identified communications tools such as Google Groups and how individual organizations can employ information technology to meet their communications needs. He guided participants to identify what kind of organization they belong to based on how they distribute information: either the type that everybody uses as a referral source, or one that is a networking source.

Roca staff shared how the organization prepared a DVD documenting immigrants’ stories, which was presented at a public hearing. The video gave voice to a segment of the population that may not otherwise have been heard with regard to immigrant services. Roca staff and volunteers developed their digital storytelling skills while participating in KLCC’s youth-adult partnerships session.

Youth participation in the Roca Arts Café during the Learning Exchange demonstrated the value of keeping young people engaged in community change work. During their performances, youth seized the opportunity to talk about their KLCC experience, underscoring the necessity to keep things fresh so that youth stay motivated over time.

Approximately 150 people attended the Arts Café, 45 of whom were Community Leadership Exchange participants (these included Roca staff and volunteers, teachers and education administrators from New York and Texas, and personnel from a couple of state and regional organizations with which Roca has affiliations). The furtherance of Roca’s broader agenda depends upon these state and regional relationships beyond its grassroots and community commitment.

Interactivity was the centerpiece of the Roca learning exchange, something that was deliberately integrated in the conference planning. “We learned the importance of creating a gracious space to be flexible so that participants know that you’re thinking of them first,” Santana says. “People are really looking for alternative ways to communicate or to learn. They will take this back to their classrooms and communities.”
A new crop of high-school-age KLCC fellows has taken up the mantle of collective leadership and activism at the Boys & Girls Club of Benton Harbor (BGCBH). The club’s previous group of youth fellows left an impressive legacy of work, which included working with a rival high school to collect Christmas gifts for soldiers in Iraq, creating a new technology lab at the Club, and weighing in on city development plans from the mayor’s youth office.

“The newer fellows have taken part in some meetings with the mayor regarding a new skating rink, to help design it and see how [things] look,” says Liji Hanny, director of youth programs at the Club. Hanny enjoyed a special relationship with the previous group of fellows (see the May 2008 issue of the KLCC Bridge, pg. 3). He witnessed their personal growth as well as the community’s increased receptivity to youth involvement in civic affairs. As a result of the KLCC fellows’ work, the city has crafted a feeder program to prep younger teens to become involved in the political process and youth-adult partnerships are being taken more seriously by policy makers outside the fellowship.

Youth leaders are emerging inside the club as well. KLCC Session Two youth fellow Ardale Clark now works on the BGCBH staff where he heads the youth crime watch and drama programs, respectively. “The Youth Crime Watch program is taking youth and making them accountable on many levels, on making things run smoother,” Clark says. “We need more youth programs on weekends, [especially something like] weekend clean ups.” Clark cites a motto he and his colleagues use to guide their work: “My problems plus my community equals our solutions.” ▲

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Benton Harbor Welcomes the Foundation

The good work of the Boys and Girls Club of Benton Harbor (BGCBH) has not gone unnoticed by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. Several program directors from the Foundation recently visited the Club to learn more about the KLCC national program and the work fellows are doing at BGCBH. Christine Kwak, program director of KLCC Session Two, invited KLCC coordinating organization members Dale Nienow of the Center for Ethical Leadership and Elayne Dorsey of Dorsey and Associates to join the program directors’ visit and to explain the concept of KLCC to BGCBH’s new executive director, Doug Schafer.

“[Chris] wanted to do a site visit to orient him to KLCC and to get an update from the KLCC team on what they are working on,” Nienow says.

BGCBH took the opportunity of having Kellogg program directors on hand to explain how KLCC has helped them to grow into the functioning organization they are today. “We did not know about youth-adult partnerships, we knew about collective leadership, but had not put it into practice purposefully,” says youth program director Liji Hanny. As he explained it, the organization went from never having had an 18 or 19 year old as a deliverer of programs, to their current situation in which two KLCC fellows now run programs at the Club.

“Now we have James Gunter and Ardale Clark,” Hanny says. “These two young men are responsible for the computer lab as well as the youth crime watch and drama program, respectively. It has been an awakening experience for us and we hope [Kellogg] can help us reach more kids.”

In addition to using the visit as a teaching opportunity for the new executive director, this visit was also a learning opportunity for the Foundation. Despite being situated in a community that has experienced a prolonged period of decline, BGCBH has worked diligently, relying on the model of youth-adult partnerships, to do its part in addressing community needs. For example, this season finds their two youth development groups, Young Men with a Purpose and Ladies of Excellence, learning about and tackling issues of domestic violence through Christmas gift giving to families who have been victimized by this scourge. The Foundation visitors learned firsthand what community change work in Michigan looks like.

“The Boys and Girls Club’s longstanding model of youth development has been strengthened through [KLCC’s] emphasis on youth-adult partnership, another dimension of what it means to build community together,” says Nienow. In his observation, it is the difference between full on youth development and the more equitable youth-adult partnership that holds the most promise for promoting just communities.

This partnership model is being used in support of a range of community-building work that takes place year round. In addition to the youth office at city hall where recent youth fellow Samantha Gunter brings a youth voice to city policy issues, other partnership fellows are working on programs to get high school students ready for college; support and education for parents helping their kids with college applications; and tutoring for high school as well as college kids to help them succeed academically.

One of the realities of Benton Harbor, however, is a decades-spanning narrative that can make imagining change difficult. One of the Foundation managers wondered aloud how best to address the need for change from a place-based perspective. In response to the question, Nienow says, “The story line coming out of Benton Harbor has the potential to be part of the changing story of Benton Harbor. There is something quite powerful emerging, but it’s not fast work, it requires staying power.” This is not a revelation for people in the trenches who are actually doing the community change work. They know that the depth of the problems they seek to address requires more than a glossing over. “We are a small community and sometimes because of our size, people think our problems and fixes can be small,” says Hanny. “The truth is that problems are big and we need big solutions and big thinkers. [The Foundation] got that point.”

Comments and news brief items should be forwarded to info@klccleadership.org.
“There's a lot of hope and excitement among youth, among kids; it's something really new and different. My brother and I were running to the TV when [Barack Obama] became president. I've never seen that much excitement. Being in college, who we're voting for [matters].”

— Jacquie Granados, KLCC youth coach, Mi Casa Resource Center.