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By Deborah Sakry Lande

Carrying the Torch

An innovative peer coaching program for nonprofit organizations

Peer coaching programs are gaining momentum, and a bold Minneapolis nonprofit called AmeriCoach dares to put nonprofits and twenty-somethings on the cutting edge of the trend. Ursula Pottinga and Ann Betz, passionate Certified Coaches and Master Facilitators, started the entrepreneurial AmeriCoach four years ago. They started with a vision to create sustainable change within nonprofits by offering group and one-on-one coaching experiences to AmeriCorps service learning volunteers. This combination of cohort-type training sessions and individualized life coaching was the foundation of the AmeriCoach program. As the graduates emerged to share their new skills with co-workers in their host organizations, it

and philanthropic life coaches to offer their time for free.

Free for service – a bold idea!

In an industry where many coaches are self-employed and time really *is* money, it was risky to build a new organization around the premise that coaches must give their time and expertise for free. “The principle of ‘paying forward,’ of giving back, is one of the most important principles of my coaching practice,” stated Christine M. Gilmore, CPCC. “Having been trained as a coach by the Coaches Training Institute (CTI) and personally benefiting from CTI’s own spirit of openness and generosity, it’s an example I love to live by



“The torch of change was ignited by service learning volunteers and nonprofit leaders.”

became clear they were hungry for more. Ursula and Ann added a Peer Coaching Program and gave those who completed a rigorous curriculum and test the privilege of being called Approved AmeriCoach Facilitators. In order to thrive, both programs required generous

and to continue putting out into the world. AmeriCoach and AmeriCorps are organizations which are also founded on such principles, so for me it’s a natural, exciting combination. Partnering young AmeriCorps participants with a life coach is such an exciting, motivational concept in

itself! Coaching passionate young people who give so much of themselves in service of society is what keeps me involved.” It was coaches like Ms. Gilmore who built the early program. Over 300 professional coaches from across the United States, Canada and Europe volunteered to be matched with an AmeriCoach program participant, many of whom are under age 29.

Nonprofits carry the torch

Through the AmeriCoach program, the torch of change was ignited by service learning volunteers and nonprofit leaders. These individuals wanted to instantly share what they learned at the AmeriCoach trainings with their co-workers. It became obvious that Ursula and Ann had more participants than the two of them could handle alone. They needed more trainers. As a result, they developed a peer coaching or train the trainer curriculum. The AmeriCoach Peer Coaching Program, a powerful leadership pro-

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gram that both teaches people how to use basic coaching skills and additionally prepares them to teach others basic coaching principles, was born. The innovative combination builds participants' leadership muscles in amazing ways. It also gives participants a practical, powerful, yet easy to use curriculum that can be shared with a wide range of people inside and outside their own organizations.

The AmeriCoach Peer Coaching Program is now conducted twice per year and has made a lasting impact on the culture and capacity of local nonprofits. An early partner organi-

have made a profound impact on the culture of our organization."

One coach, who was paired with a staff member, was thrilled to know that her work benefited her client *and* the broader community. Maripat A., a professional coach, stated, "I am committed to pro bono coaching at least two clients in my coaching practice at all times. Believe it or not, it wasn't easy for me to find willing clients to coach for free! AmeriCoach's programs allowed me to connect easily with a very motivated client. It's a beautiful thing to give the gift of coaching to a client that desires to express

completed the Peer Coaching Program and received Approved AmeriCoach Facilitator status. When this status is achieved, an AmeriCoach Facilitator is fully prepared to lead the AmeriCoach curriculum and use their leadership skills with other cohort members, program staff and others. These skills enable them to provide trainings, facilitate learning sessions, and play a leadership role in creating a positive and productive work culture in their host organizations.

Once William became an Approved AmeriCoach Facilitator with Ursula and Ann, he signed up at CTI to continue his studies in the industry. Another participant of the Peer Coaching Program stated, "To adequately train others you have to know the subject matter and know how you personally feel about the subject area. This program allowed me to explore both. This process of self discovery, one-on-one coaching and practical tools allows me to thrive as a stronger leader in my organization." The participants gain skills, tools and professional coaching to improve their clarity on values, purpose, and leadership. Still another participant concluded, "In my day-to-day nonprofit job I can feel isolated and unsure of myself. Here, in this coaching program, I am deeply connected to those sharing this powerful experience with me. And, I will use the tools I gained to help my peers and the people I serve." •

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zation, Project for Pride in Living, a Minneapolis-based housing and services organization, committed to the coaching concepts. Senior Vice President Susan Baldwin states, "Between the original AmeriCoach trainings and the now expanded Peer Coaching Program, over 30 staff and volunteers have participated in this coaching experience and the number continues to grow as those of us who completed the Peer Coaching Program continue to offer the training to new AmeriCorps and permanent staff. Opportunities like these are a luxury in the nonprofit world so we feel honored to know, and be able to teach others, the 'language' of the coaching industry. Tools such as identifying personal limiting beliefs, encouraging powerful questions to gain clarity, and using conflict resolution strategies,

herself more fully in her world and to impact her organization in a more powerful way. I learned that coaching impacts not just your client, but all of those around her."

Young leaders emerge as facilitators

As the program evolved, it became clear that some of the young participants had amazing potential. One of the first young people to emerge as a rising star was William Grier. William had the passion and skills to carry the coaching and facilitating skills he learned in AmeriCoach to other people. "I gained skills, skills and more skills. Specifically, I gained insight into coaching as a job. I learned leadership skills through the group training sessions and I experienced personal awakenings on my own." William was one of the participants who successfully