

Great leaders among us

Published in the Chronicle-Independent September 10, 2007.

Imagine being put into a group and assigned the task of improving on the Declaration of Independence. If you are remotely familiar with the resonating language and powerful principles contained in that great document, you will agree that this was a daunting, almost sacrilegious, assignment. This is an example of one of many discussions that I participated in during my week at the Aspen Institute, a week devoted to the principles of positive leadership.

Of course, my group had great difficulty offering up any improvements to one of the greatest documents of human civilization. In fact, I do not believe that our moderators actually expected anyone to edit the document. However, the exercise was meaningful in that it reaffirmed for me the extraordinary brilliance and courage that existed in the hearts and minds of the men that formed our nation. We can only hope to keep that same passion and understanding of these great principles alive today.

The opportunity to participate in the Executive Seminar at the Aspen Institute in Aspen, Colorado is one of the opportunities afforded by my participation in the Liberty Fellowship program. The Aspen Institute, as described in its literature, was founded as a place for thinkers, leaders, and artists from all over the world to step away from their daily routines and reflect on the underlying values of society and culture. The Executive Seminar is a forum discussing selections from the writings of great thinkers of the past and present to give present and potential leaders a better understanding of the challenges facing the organizations and communities they serve.

I was part of a group that consisted of top executives of global companies, high-level federal government employees, directors of influential foundations and not-for-profit organizations, and other highly successful businessmen and businesswomen. While I was the only elected official in the group of twenty, I was most definitely surrounded by true leaders who have enormous impact in their fields including foreign relations, government accountability, corporate management, and medicine, just to mention a few.

Despite my physical distance from home, the sometimes esoteric texts, and the new people that shared this week with me, my thoughts always turned to the people and circumstances I know best that affect my constituents and South Carolina. As we discussed leadership and civic responsibility around the table in Aspen, leaders in Kershaw County always came to mind. As I work and live in this community, the person standing next to me is my teacher. No matter where I go or whom I meet, my greatest lessons have been learned in this community from the leaders in our churches, schools, businesses, and neighborhoods.

During the period between legislative sessions, I am often asked how I am enjoying my "time off." However, I am quick to point out that I have a very active constituency that does good work year-round. It is my privilege to work alongside these civic-minded and

motivated individuals and groups that are making a positive difference in our community and state.

When I reflect on the principles of leadership, one of my favorite moments in history is when Gandhi, the great political and spiritual leader of India, organized a massive march to the sea to protest a tax on salt. When Gandhi was stopped by reporters on the way, he remarked, "My people are leaving and I must follow them for I am their leader."

As an elected leader, one of my most important responsibilities is to listen to, recognize, and act on the best instincts of the members of this community. Together and individually, we have very important roles to fill as we strive to realize our highest potential both as individuals and as a community.