

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

THE LAWRENCE POSSE GETS STUDENTS TALKING

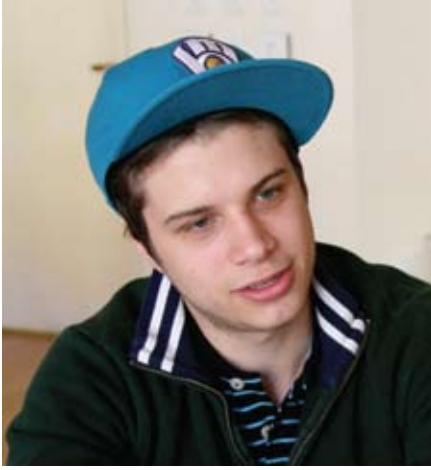
by Sheree Rogers

Last spring, more than 3,000 students at 31 colleges and universities nationwide engaged in a dialogue about social responsibility — the belief that whether it's government, a corporation, organization, or individual, we all have a role to play in protecting the welfare of our planet and its people. Forty Lawrence students, faculty, and staff members were among them, participating in an unusual weekend retreat to tackle subjects like racism, poverty, political apathy, global warming, and respect for others.

Perhaps most unusual was the fact that 10 freshmen led the discussion — a *posse* of strangers-turned-friends-turned-classmates who came to Lawrence from New York in the fall of 2007 to study and, yes, to challenge the status quo on campus.

Viktoriya Sionov, Brooklyn; Raymond Verceles, Woodhaven; Jismy Raju, Staten Island; Jake Hartmann, New York; Mei Xian Gong, Brooklyn; Silvio Marquez, Bronx; Driftnerly Martinez, South Richmond Hill; Dorcas Montes, Bronx; Jasmine Peters-McClashie, Brooklyn; and Isake Smith, Brooklyn, represent the beginning of a bold new Lawrence initiative that was born in the Bronx in 1989. (See sidebar on page 11.) In the 11 months since their arrival, the members of Lawrence Posse 1 have successfully completed their freshman year, participated in a mind-boggling array of campus and community activities, and hosted the first Lawrence Posse Plus Retreat at Björklunden, Lawrence's seminar center in Door County, Wis.





Former Vice President Al Gore opened the “Social Responsibility — Who Cares?” retreat with a video message encouraging participants not just to discuss ideas, but also to act. “I do believe that we can gain moral authority and long-term vision in rising to solve the climate crisis and that in that way, we will increase our capacity to address all of the other issues that you’re weighing in your discussions — for example Darfur and healthcare for those who don’t have it now, the rebuilding and reclaiming of New Orleans, and ending the war in Iraq,” Gore said.

And during the next two days, retreat participants identified their own list of social issues and concerns they wanted to confront, and creatively engaged in activities, games, and workshops to determine what could be done to address them.

“I admire them for their ambition, confidence, and willingness to start important dialogue on issues that concern our campus community.”
— *Katelin Richter '11*



At first the focus was on large global concerns, then national issues, local problems, and, finally, their attention was directed toward the Lawrence community. “We did discuss large-scale problems and realized we can’t always change things by ourselves and we want to feel like we contributed somehow,” said Raju, a Posse scholar who invited several of her friends to join the retreat. “Simple things like recycling or talking to one unfamiliar person a day are tasks that we can do ourselves.”

TAKING A STAND

While the solutions to some of the concerns that were identified — global warming, for example — seem to require vast resources and scientific expertise, others require only a willingness to speak out. During a session called “The Human Bar Graph” retreat participants were asked to stand in lines with others sharing their response to questions like, “If you witness someone slipping a pill into another person’s drink, how likely are you to say something?” The human lines on the bar graph indicated most students were not likely to respond, with many saying they did not want to be drawn into in a difficult situation. Later, following small group discussions, a few students reconsidered their ability to right a wrong.

“I left the retreat feeling empowered,” said Hartmann. “I’ve become more thoughtful of my actions and the actions of others around me. I make a conscious effort to stay on the ball and be responsible to the world around me.”



Lawrence Posse 2: Pictured clockwise from lower left are Jonathan Jones, Bronx; Masud Wiese, Oakland Gardens; Antonio Melara, Flushing; Corey Torres, New York; Eric Murray, East Elmhurst; Sasha Johnston, Brooklyn; Alex Ajayi, New York; Natasha Pugh, Brooklyn; Stephanie Jaquez, Bronx; and, center, Xiao Hong Zhang, New York. Members of Posse 2 will begin classes in September 2008.

Upper left: Jake Hartmann '11, Katelin Richter '11, and BreeSean Pittman '11

Lower left: Jismy Raju '11

In another workshop, a handful of participants were read a controversial statement, such as “all immigrants are criminals” or “all women who have abortions are irresponsible.” They were asked to choose a position on a line labeled “strongly agree” at one end and “strongly disagree” on the other. They then defended their positions and listened to others share alternative points of view.

BreeSean Pittman '11 found the retreat both liberating and sobering. “It was refreshing to finally talk about current issues in the context of social responsibility with my peers and respected adults. It helped to confirm some of my beliefs, challenged others, and introduced new topics for me to consider...I can say that this event has made me more aware of the weight of responsibility I hold on my shoulders.”

By the end of the weekend, the group produced a prioritized list of concerns and possible solutions that were forwarded to The Posse Foundation’s national headquarters in New York. Lawrence University’s social responsibility solutions will be combined with recommendations from other universities and a white paper will be published later this year, sharing all of the ideas with colleges and universities across the country. ■

THE POSSE FOUNDATION

Deborah Bial was working as a counselor in New York’s public high schools, watching bright minority students go off to college only to drop out six months later. “One low-income kid from the Bronx — a really bright kid who’d gotten a full scholarship to an Ivy League school — told me he probably could have made it if he’d had his posse with him,” said Bial. That statement inspired a movement resulting in the education of thousands of urban youth leaders at top-tier colleges and universities across the country. In addition to Lawrence, The Posse Foundation partners with institutions like Vanderbilt University, Brandeis University, Carleton College, the University of Wisconsin, and the University of Michigan.

The foundation identifies, recruits, and trains hundreds of youth leaders from urban public high schools in Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, Washington, D.C., and Atlanta. The participating colleges agree to provide scholarships and, each year, each college selects 10 high school seniors from a pool of applicants, taking into account which students are most likely to succeed and make a difference. Those students become a posse and participate together in an intensive eight-month pre-collegiate training program.

By the time the posse arrives on campus, its individual members have the skills needed to succeed academically, to support for each other academically and socially, and to promote cross-cultural communication.

The concept of a posse works for both students and college campuses, and is rooted in the belief that a small, diverse group of carefully selected and trained students can serve as a catalyst for increased individual and community development.

For more information about Posse, visit www.possefoundation.org.