Celebrating Community Leaders

Two community residents, a local nonprofit and a corporation received awards at the Virginia LISC Celebrating Community Leaders event on Thursday, Sept. 28, 2017, at the Richmond Raceway Torque Club. Virginia LISC recognized Sunday Jones, a resident leader from Richmond’s Highland Park neighborhood, Mary White Thompson, a resident leader from Church Hill, Altria and project:HOMES for their ongoing work in Richmond and Petersburg neighborhoods.

The Honorable Terry McAuliffe, Governor of the Commonwealth of Virginia, and the Honorable Levar Stoney, Mayor of the City of Richmond, provided remarks at the event, thanking both Virginia LISC and the honorees for their hard work to make Richmond neighborhoods good places to work, play and raise families.

LISC CEO and President Maurice Jones also spoke at the event on the importance of community leadership.

"I want to thank tonight’s four honorees for their hard work, but more importantly, I want to thank them for their heart because it is the heart that drives them to do this work," said Jones.

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Basketball league reduces crime

The smell of sweat lingered in the air of the packed gym as a young mom and her four-year-old son squeezed into some of the last available seats overlooking the basketball court. College games don’t even draw crowds like this. Yet, on a Tuesday night in the middle of July, people sat elbow to elbow, the atmosphere hot with anticipation.

“It’s been like this every Tuesday and Thursday since the league started,” said GiTonya Parker, business services, the Richmond Police Department.

The RVA’s League for Safer Streets midnight basketball—the brainchild of Jawad Abdu and Paul Taylor and paid for by Virginia LISC—was a success the minute it began.

The league brought together teams from seven of Richmond’s most crime-ridden neighborhoods in an effort to keep young adults busy and off the streets on summer nights. The Richmond Police Department officers volunteered their time to oversee the games.

“I grew up in the Richmond that was on the news at least three times a week for crime,” said Abdu. “It was a dangerous place in the ‘90s and today people are dying because these young adults have nothing to do. Paul and I wanted to fix that,” he said.

The teams included: Whitcomb Court, Creighton Court, Mosby Court, Fairfield Court, Fairfield Apartments, Highland Park and Church Hill. Each team consisted of 7-12 men, ranging from age 17 to 28.

The one stipulation for playing on the league was that each team member was required to participate in a 45-minute workshop before every game, and the rule was, “no workshops, no jump shots.”

There were different topics for each workshop—responsibility, employment opportunities, child support, fatherhood, PTSD, respect for women—issues that Taylor and Abdu felt should be addressed with these young men.

“When I heard about Abdu and Taylor’s idea to start a summer basketball league aimed at keeping young men in our neighborhoods active and engaged, I offered to fund the program right away,” said Candice Streett, executive director of Virginia LISC. “Not only were the games happening right in Highland Park, where we are focusing a lot of our neighborhood work, but the program addresses crime, safety and healthy living all in one.”

The league tore down boundaries in more ways than one. Neighborhoods that had been at war with each other for decades, played basketball against each other, leaving violence off the court. Police officers and players formed relationships. Mothers, fathers, girlfriends, wives and children all packed the stands, eager to watch their husbands, boyfriends, sons and fathers on the court. Young men gained mentors in Taylor and Abdu, who both had spent decades themselves in prison and wanted to help others avoid that path.

And most importantly, crimes in these neighborhoods dropped during the six weeks of games.

“During that six weeks, we didn’t have any really violent crime in our communities, and I think it was attributed to the program that these guys—Mr. Paul Taylor and Mr. Jawad Abdu—had the vision for,” said Chief Durham of the Richmond Police Department. “Soon after the program ended, the violence sparked up again, so we’ve got to find ways to continue this work for the long haul,” he said.

Both Taylor and Abdu were overwhelmed with the success of the program and eager to find the funding to continue the league in seasons to come.

“The workshops are the real substance of this program,” said Taylor. “They learn conflict resolution, get connected to job opportunities and learn a different way of doing things.”

Abdu agreed, saying, “I’m so proud that the vision Taylor and I talked about for years in prison became a reality, and now we want to make sure we find a way to make it a sustainable reality.”

Newport News hospital

Virginia LISC is providing a $1.9 million predevelopment loan for the renovation of the historical Whittaker Memorial Hospital to be converted into 62 affordable apartment units.

Whittaker Development II, LLC will be the developer of the hospital, which is located in Newport News and is listed on the National Historic Registry.

Once the renovation is complete, there will be 23 one-bedroom apartments and 39 two-bedroom apartments.

“This is the kind of development that we get excited about at Virginia LISC because we are taking an historically prominent building and repurposing it so that it can continue to serve the neighborhood,” said Schirra Hayes, the loan officer at Virginia LISC responsible for overseeing the lending on the project.

The hospital is historically significant as it was the manifestation of the vision of two African American physicians to provide quality medical care to the growing African American population in Newport News in the early 1900’s. Prior to the founding of Whittaker Memorial Hospital in 1908, the only medical care available to African American citizens in Newport News was a clinic housed in the city jail.

Whittaker Memorial Hospital served the African American community in Newport News until it closed in 1985.

The 1943 Whittaker Memorial Hospital building represents the work of prominent African American architects, William Henry Moses, Jr. and Charles Thaddeus Russell, and Benson Leroy Dutton, an African American engineer.

It is one of a few African American hospitals in the United States that was built by African American physicians and designed by African American architects.
The awards were presented by Susan Dewey, executive director of Virginia Housing Development Authority, and Streett. Streett also gave closing remarks.

“Like our awardees tonight, many of your work every day to make a difference,” said Streett to the audience of nearly 200 people. “You change lives. You are our partners, our friends and our supporters, and we at LISC could not do this work of building strong communities without you.”

After the program ended, guests enjoyed hors d’oeuvres, jazz music and drinks at the Torque Club.

Project: HOMES has been a strong partner of Virginia LISC for decades, working together in many neighborhoods in Richmond and Petersburg to rehabilitate blighted and vacant housing. This partnership is evidenced in Petersburg, where Virginia LISC and project: HOMES are working in the historic neighborhood of Poplar Lawn. And it is evidenced in the Northside, where the two organizations are working alongside each other at Six Points in Highland Park.

Altria has been a leader in providing corporate partnership for Richmond’s nonprofits.

An early supporter for the Richmond LISC office, Altria most recently worked with Virginia LISC, the City of Richmond and other nonprofits on an initiative to revitalize housing in one of Richmond’s Southside neighborhoods.

Virginia LISC leveraged the grant funding from Altria with LISC grant and lending capital, as well as city resources, and partnered with two nonprofit housing organizations to work towards stabilizing the home-ownership base in the area.

Ms. Sunday Jones moved to Highland Park in 2005 and has been a driving force in the neighborhood ever since. Jones first got involved with her community through the Quality of Life planning process in Highland Park.

A quick drive through Highland Park and around the Six Points intersection will reveal just how much work Jones and others in Highland Park have done in the past few years. Many businesses have fresh coats of paint, there is a new roundabout at the Six Points intersection and 77 new apartments now occupy the once-vacant school building at Six Points.

Many people contributed to these changes, but it is residents like Jones, who have been pushing for these changes in community meetings for years, that have kept the ball rolling.

Mrs. Mary White Thompson went to high school, married her husband, raised five children, and served as the Fairmount School secretary all in Church Hill. As a resident for the past 65 years, she has seen the ups and downs of the community. As a founding member of the New Visions Civic League, Mrs. Thompson worked alongside community developers in Church Hill to revitalize her neighborhood.

Mrs. Thompson not only works with housing nonprofits and community developers, but she also befriends the local community police officers in her neighborhood. Most recently, she has helped Virginia LISC canvas the 25th Street commercial corridor in Church Hill. She is the neighbor that everyone wants to have and the community advocate that everyone needs to be.
Small business programs underway in Northside and Church Hill

Virginia LISC, Bon Secours and Capital One announced the Round 6 SEED winners in late September. This year’s winners include three startup businesses and two existing businesses located close to the 25th Street and Nine Mile Road intersection. This year’s new businesses include: The Neighborhood Scoop, a soft serve ice cream shop; Soul N’ Vinegar, a prepared foods takeout shop; and Happiness Dance Studios, a neighborhood dance studio. The two existing businesses are Jade Salon, a multi-cultural hair salon and a two-time SEED winner, and The Yard Guy, a lawn care service.

Four of the five businesses are already open on the corridor. Soul N’ Vinegar is planning to open in the spring of 2018. Below are the addresses for the businesses.

**Happiness Dance Studios**
1003 N. 25th Street, used grant funds to install a dance floor, mirrors and barres.

**The Neighborhood Scoop**
1400 N. 26th Street, used grant to purchase soft serve machines.

**Jade Salon**
3304 East Marshall Street, used grant on business training class.

**The Yard Guy**
901 N. 31st Street, purchased a dump truck with grant funds.

**Soul N’ Vinegar**
2832 R Street—not open yet.

For more information about SEED, contact Killeen King at kking@lisc.org.

Virginia LISC and Capital One also are partnering on a small business grant program on Richmond’s Northside around the Six Points intersection in Highland Park, providing grants to business owners to make façade improvements and equipment purchases. The program launched this spring and the three selected businesses are Chicken Box, LSG Enterprises and Stay Focused Hair Salon.

For more information about 6BIZ, contact Shekinah Mitchell at smitchell@lisc.org.

Pictured above: Dee Birchett, owner of the The Yard Guy, a lawn service and a 2017 SEED winner. Photo: Bon Secours. Pictured to the right: Penny Burnett, owner of Stay Focused Hair Salon, and a 6BIZ winner. Photo: Taylor Dabney.

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