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# LNI graduates latest class of region leaders



John Luke, The Tir

Jena Bellezza, center, Marketing and Community Relations director of Indiana Parenting Institute speaks to other participants in the Leadership Northwest Indiana class Friday at the Harre Union on Valparaiso University's campus.



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VALPARAISO | Being a leader involves constant growth, expanding your horizons and finding your passion, according to the 39 men and women who graduated Friday from the 34th Leadership Northwest Indiana class during a luncheon at Valparaiso University's Harre Union.

"One goal of the Leadership Northwest Indiana program is to develop a source of informed, civic-oriented leaders who are interested in helping

direct the future of Northwest Indiana," said Keith Kirkpatrick, executive director of the South Shore Leadership Center, which coordinates LNI.

This Class of 2013 brings the total of program graduates to 1,000.

Now in its 30th year, LNI provides an opportunity for class participants to network with Northwest Indiana decision-makers through monthly sessions and other community forums, Kirkpatrick said. The program is offered to leaders from business, government, nonprofits and social services from Northwest Indiana's seven-county region.

"This just gets better and better," Mark Reshkin, retired professor from Indiana University Northwest, told the group. "I hope this has changed your journey."

All the participants said they have been changed by the 10-month program of education, information and interaction. For most, the program showed them how diverse Northwest Indiana is.

"A lot of times, we live in a box, a box of poverty, a box of the middle class. I've seen families who have never been out of their boxes. They no idea what a gold mine they sit on," said Jena Bellezza of Crown Point, marketing and community relations director for Indiana Parenting Institute in Gary.

"I want to set up bus tours (of Northwest Indiana) for our clients and others in the community," she said.

Dimitiri Olympidis, of Valparaiso, moved back to Northwest Indiana in 2011 and joined the family business, Family Express Corp.

The LN I program showed him that "leadership expands beyond what I thought it was," he said. "This has opened my eyes to what is important to me."

Jane Reed, of Lowell, is the county extension director for the Purdue Extension Service in Lake

County and said she plans to “go outside the area and speak to co-workers and family about what a neat place this is. “

Faced with what she called “a wealth of information,” Director of Program Services for the Boys & Girls Clubs of Northwest Indiana Rachel Wright, of Merrillville, said she wasn’t certain how she will apply what she learned.

However, Wright said, “You can always grow as a leader. You’re always going to be a better leader tomorrow.”

For Angie Nelson, of Michigan City, bringing more youth into leadership roles is vital in LaPorte County.

“My goal is to help keep the pipeline of leadership going. My focus is on programs for kids,” said Nelson, public affairs manager for NIPSCO covering five counties.