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Young business executives embrace the value of giving back

Group now meets once a month at the Mason Enterprise Center

by Gregg MacDonald | STAFF WRITER

Entrepreneur, executive coach and philanthropist Steve Gladis doesn't like revealing his age.

"I've been around forever and have a kid that's 37, so I think people can figure it out for themselves," he said.

In addition to being CEO of his own executive coaching company and teaching business communication classes at George Mason University, Gladis also is the founder of a small group of 18 or so emerging business leaders that is quickly becoming a force in Northern Virginia business and philanthropy circles.

The group, Young Business Leaders, is made up of top-level executives in their 20s and 30s, and has been convening monthly for a year-and-a-half.

According to Gladis, the group's philanthropic contributions just slightly trail those of bigger, more established businesses. "At a recent Community Foundation for Northern Virginia gala, YBL, with a \$13,000 contribution, was one of the foundation's largest contributors, just behind Booz Allen Hamilton, which donated \$15,000," he said.

YBL includes young executives, CEOs and founders of Fairfax-based businesses, drawn mainly from Northern Virginia's hotbed of technology and government contracting firms.

Gladis said he got the idea for the group one day while he met with some fellow local philanthropists in their 70s and 80s whom he calls the "stalwarts of yesteryear."

"We were just sitting around and talking and the question came up: 'Where are the future philanthropists?' The question really got under my skin."

Gladis said he gathered the names of 20 or so young local entrepreneurs and sent out an email inviting them to an impromptu meeting to discuss future philanthropy in Northern Virginia.

"About 15 of the 20 showed up," he said. "It all started from there."

The group now meets on the second Friday of each month at the Mason Enterprise Center in Fairfax.

"These guys are already superstars in terms of business acumen," said Gladis. "I simply try to teach them to consider philanthropy as part of their long-term business plan and remind them that paying taxes isn't quite enough. Giving back to a local community where your family lives and your kids go to school is very important."

Gladis said his message has been well received and that YBL's community impact is growing.

"The forum pushes you to do more as you aim to keep up with some of the most talented and motivated

individuals in our region on personal, professional and philanthropic levels," says Kevin DeSanto, founding partner of Kipps-Desanto.

YBL meetings typically include a guest speaker from the business community who shares information about his or her business, leadership style and corporate and personal philanthropy.

Recent and upcoming guests include: Adrian Chapman, president and chief operating officer of Washington Gas; Jerry Gordon, president and chief executive officer of the Fairfax County Economic Development Authority; and Alex Orfinger, editor of Washington Business Journal.

Gladis said that unlike some other philanthropic, or "Vista," groups that can charge as much as \$10,000 to join, YBL requires its members to each make a \$1,000 annual donation to the Community Foundation for Northern Virginia.

"I tell these guys, 'You are the future,'" Gladis said.

Preparing the future generation is important for the welfare of the community, said Gerald L. Gordon, president and CEO of the Fairfax County Economic Development Authority.

"The development of Fairfax County into one of the world's premier business locations represents a textbook example of the quality of leadership among our business and community leaders," Gordon said. "Ultimately, each generation passes on the reins of leadership to the next. It is critically important that they are well-prepared to maintain the position of Fairfax County as a dynamic business and technology center."

Members of YBL seem to relish that responsibility.

"YBL has reinforced the value of giving back to our community, both as a responsibility and an opportunity to leave a legacy," said YBL member Emeka Moneme, executive managing director of the Carmen Group.

"YBL provides me with a unique perspective on leadership, best practices and business development," added member Lawrence Stanley, who is managing partner and founder of The Cap-X Group, LLC. "As I focus on taking my business and philanthropic life to the next level, YBL has encouraged me to think outside the box to refine my business model while balancing work and life challenges."

Although he is a professional business coach, Gladis donates his time coaching the group on a pro-bono basis. "The value of YBL for me is that it represents the future of the Northern Virginia region," he said.

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