

Life Skills Instructors Make a Difference

BY LYN MANESS

MEET STEPUP INSTRUCTORS, **Carol Willingham** and **Michael Sledge**. For the past four years, these two dedicated volunteers have been instructors in the Life Skills program, where they teach Financial Literacy. During this phase, participants learn the basic concepts of personal budgeting and goal setting. StepUP appreciates the gifts of time, talents and enthusiasm that Carol and Michael bring to their roles as instructors in the Life Skills program.

CAROL WILLINGHAM Thoughtful, patient, kind and dedicated, Carol has been volunteering her time in the Life Skills program since 2004. Since then, she has seen the program grow dramatically.

Born in Lincolnton, NC and raised in Fayetteville and Alexandria, VA, Carol is a graduate of Davidson College with a degree in Economics. She has worked as a financial consultant for Merrill Lynch for the past 25 years. Her husband, Ed, who is also a graduate of Davidson, is a banker with First Citizens Bank in Raleigh. They have four boys—Kirk, 28; Ryan, 26; Evan and Davis, both of whom are in college at UNC-Chapel Hill.



Carol Willingham and Michael Sledge enjoy team teaching at the Financial Literacy program.

As an instructor in financial literacy, Carol devotes each Tuesday evening to StepUP, where she and partner, Michael Sledge, teach the fundamental concepts of budgeting and saving. The course lasts for ten weeks. Two primary goals of the course are for participants to produce a workable budget and to set at least three

to five personal goals which may be financial, educational, spiritual, or career related. The class is highly interactive, emphasizing a basic review of financial concepts. Class time is devoted to discussing spending habits, differentiating between needs and wants, and lifestyle changes that can be made to ensure there is money left over at the end

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STEPUP WELCOMES JENNIE ARMSTRONG

AFTER AN EXTENSIVE SEARCH, ably assisted by Philanthropic Advisory Group, the Board of Directors brought Jennie Armstrong into the StepUP family as our new Executive Director. Jennie is a seasoned executive with over 15 years experience in non-profit administration.

She and her husband, Al, have recently relocated to the Triangle from Peoria, Illinois, where Jennie served as Executive Director of the Crittenton Centers, serving struggling young families and their children. Previously, she was Executive Director of an organization providing medical services to uninsured persons.

Jennie admits to facing a steep “learning curve,” but is obviously a fast learner! She is quickly becoming familiar with StepUP’s

programs and people, and she shares the deep passion of our staff for the work we do together.

On behalf of the Board, I wish to thank all who worked so hard to make this transition both smooth and enjoyable. Sharon Hayes’ capable interim leadership was greatly appreciated by all. The Transition Team, led by Gray Hutchison, did a splendid job. Our volunteers gave us their vote of confidence, and we are pleased with the result.

Please stop by and introduce yourself to Jennie and welcome her to StepUP. Thank you for your support.

Jim Hodge, CHAIR BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Co-partner Relationship Leads to Mutual Trust, Respect and Friendship

BY JENNIE ARMSTRONG



LAST YEAR, THE STEPUP LIFE SKILLS PROGRAM paired **Luwanda Jordan**, a new participant, with **Helen and Dick Rose**. Helen and Dick met Luwanda in the “middle of the road” a year ago, and said, “Let’s take these next few months to give you something that you can build on for the rest of your life. We will follow you sometimes, and other times, we will lead you. But at the end of the year, we will celebrate your spiritual and mental growth, and we will celebrate your achievement together.” And that’s exactly what they did!

I caught up with Luwanda and Helen and asked some questions about their experience at StepUP. Luwanda began the interview by saying, “Thank you for choosing Helen, Dick, and me for this great opportunity to express our gratitude.”

LUWANDA’S PERSPECTIVE:

What is the single most important tool you learned at StepUP?

“Discipline.”

What are your next steps to remain self sufficient and a good provider for your family?

“I need to continue maintaining a monthly budget, accomplish small goals to reach my long-term goals and be a good mentor to my children.”

What qualities should a co-partner possess?

“Patience, understanding, and effective communication.”

HELEN’S PERSPECTIVE:

What support do you see Luwanda and her family needing from our community in order for them to continue on the road of self sufficiency?

“Because Luwanda is going to continue with StepUP as a co-partner, I think she will stay on track in her road to self sufficiency. For her to really improve, she will need to

continue her education, with the help of StepAhead.”

What is your proudest accomplishment as a co-partner this year with Luwanda?

“Of course the thing that I am the most proud is that Luwanda graduated. I never thought that she would be one of those graduates. She did not trust me, Dick, or the StepUP system. I took her to the DMV and allowed her to use my car to take the driving test. I think after that, the mutual trust started. She did not miss a single Tuesday night or Saturday workshop the whole year she was in the program.”

You have stayed the course as a co-partner for over 10 years. What advice would you give to someone considering being a StepUP co-partner?

“Gain the trust of your participant. You can do this by being there on a regular basis and really listening to your person’s needs. Over the years, I have tried to be firm but not judgmental.”

Helen concluded by saying that what keeps her coming back is a passion for the Tuesday night program and other StepUP events. Not all of her participants succeed, but the ones who do make it worthwhile. “It’s a great feeling to know you made a difference in someone’s life, but I can never express the difference StepUP has made in my life.”

FALL CAMPAIGN FOR STEPUP IS UNDERWAY The annual campaign for StepUP is currently underway, and your help is needed to make it a success. Contributions to StepUP go directly towards providing individuals and families with a second chance to live independent, responsible and productive lives. Gifts of all sizes are needed and appreciated. Please complete and mail the form on the back of this issue, or make your gift online at www.step-up.us. Thanks for your support.

of the day. Participants are required to track their spending, and each week, they must bring receipts to class documenting income and expenses incurred for that week. This information is then recorded onto daily, weekly and monthly expense reports.

Carol says that one of the most rewarding aspects of StepUP is to see participants progress from one level to the next, gaining a sense of confidence, stability and control over their financial lives. Volunteer co-partners are a vital part of the process, working individually with each participant to identify and resolve problem areas. She says it is also rewarding to see the courage, persistence and faith that participants bring to the program. "It's a team effort, and we learn from each other," says Carol. StepUP is grateful to Carol Willingham for the dedication, skill and attention she brings to the Life Skills program. Thank you, Carol!

MICHAEL SLEDGE Raised in Emporia, VA, Michael Sledge is a graduate of Atlantic Christian (Barton) College, where he earned both an undergraduate degree in accounting and a CPA. Michael and his family have lived in Raleigh since 1987. His first position out of college was at Ernst and Young. Currently, Michael serves as Chief Financial Officer for the Duke Clinical Research Institute.

As a member of First Baptist Church in Raleigh, Michael found out about StepUP by responding to a call for volunteers in the church bulletin. For the past four years, Michael has been devoting his time and talents to teaching financial literacy in Phase I of the Life Skills program. In this capacity, Michael team teaches with Carol Willingham every Tuesday night for 10 weeks. Michael says what he finds most rewarding is watching participants progress through the program, making profound changes in their lives. "It is amazing to see the transformation that takes place when an individual goes through the Life Skills pro-

gram," says Michael. "Ultimately, what is most gratifying is to see a participant who has gone through the program return as a co-partner." While Michael views his role as more of a facilitator, he says that co-partners are an integral part of the process, working individually with each participant to solve problems and to put a financial plan into place.

One of the most important lessons the program teaches is learning how to make wise choices with limited resources. "If you say 'yes' to one thing, you are saying 'no' to another," says Michael. One has to decide what is most important or critical. "It's not a question as to whether you can create a workable budget, but if you are willing to do it, it can be done." StepUP appreciates the devotion and expertise that Michael brings to his role as an instructor in the financial literacy class.

On the first night of each ten-week session, financial literacy instructors Carol Willingham and Michael Sledge share words of advice from previous participants in the program. In a recent class, here is what some had to say:

It's always better to open your eyes and say you don't understand, rather than to close your eyes and say you don't believe. What a class.

—DANNY

Begin practicing anything you learn as soon as possible because it is forming good habits that will help make it easier for you in the long run.

—ANONYMOUS

Stay focused on what is going on in class and just work the program and don't let it work you. When things get confusing or a little rough for you to handle, please ask questions. The staff and co-partners are here to guide you along the way. But most important is do not give up. There is a new beginning of life if you stick to your goals. There is a new life at the end of the rainbow.

—ANONYMOUS



STEPUP CHILDREN LEARN THE VALUE OF COMMUNITY SERVICE

A GROUP OF CHILDREN from StepUP Ministry recently completed a community service activity at two of the apartment complexes that house StepUP participants. The children picked up trash and swept around the apartment complexes as a way to say thank you for supporting StepUP.

StepUP Ministry is an interfaith community that prepares people who are ready and willing to make positive changes in their lives to become self-sufficient.

STEPUP MISSION



1701 Oberlin Road
Raleigh, NC 27608
PHONE: (919) 781-0156
FAX: (919) 571-2879
www.step-up.us

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