

FOCUS ON

Gwinnett's Community Outreach Program: Building a bridge between County government and its diverse community

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The Gwinnett County Board of Commissioners set a goal a few years ago to engage residents from diverse backgrounds in county government and in 2014 tapped **Nicole Hendrickson** to lead this effort. Nicole is no stranger to community engagement, having served as the assistant director of the Gwinnett Coalition for Health and Human Services for close to a decade. During her tenure, the coalition created the Gwinnett Neighborhood Leadership Institute and coordinated the county's largest volunteer event, Great Days of Service.

Hendrickson may be a one-woman show as the Community Outreach Program director for Gwinnett County, but she's quick to attest that she could never accomplish what she does alone. *"It truly takes collaborative partnerships with County staff and community organizations to bring these diverse audiences together," she said.*



More than 50 residents, students, and business owners have participated in the Gwinnett 101 citizens academy program since it was launched in spring 2015.

Just one year ago, she spearheaded the launch of Gwinnett 101, a 10-week crash course in Gwinnett County Government operations aimed at developing and nurturing informed and engaged residents, students and business owners in the county. *"One of our goals for this academy is to improve the quality and quantity of civic participation by residents with an emphasis on underrepresented communities in local government, so we set out to select leaders from the many multicultural groups in Gwinnett County,"* Hendrickson said.

Class members spend Thursday evenings with county government leaders learning the ins and outs of their local government from a first-person perspective. The weekly sessions include an interactive history lesson conducted by Environmental and Heritage Center staff; an overview of the County's budget process from

Financial Services, the Tax Assessor and the Tax Commissioner; and a community planning session facilitated by Planning and Development.

In addition, the class tours the county's F. Wayne Hill Water Resources Center, a state-of-the-art wastewater treatment center, and the Traffic Control Center where DOT monitors busy intersections and corridors and posts real-time traffic information on the website for motorists. Participants also perform a mock trial led by judges and participate in demonstrations led by the Fire and Emergency Services, Police, and Community Services departments.

Their involvement doesn't stop once they graduate from the program; participants then become candidates to serve on County boards and authorities, including Chairman Nash's citizens budget review committee.

Gwinnett 101 alumni along with other citizens and leadership academy alums are also invited to join Chairman Nash for her monthly Dinner and Dialogue series, which are held throughout the county. Dinner and Dialogue



County residents take part in Dinner and Dialogue with Chairman Nash, a monthly event that encourages meaningful dialogue about community issues.

with Chairman Nash are small group dinners with the chairman that encourage meaningful dialogue, in-depth conversations, and discussions about community issues in an intimate, one-on-one setting. All Gwinnett residents 18 and over are welcome to attend, but they are limited to just 10 people per session.

Under the Community Outreach Program umbrella, the County recently hosted its first-ever Building Bridges Meet and Greet event, where County officials invite members of the Muslim and Southeast Asian communities to the Gwinnett Justice and Administration Center to learn about County services and discuss issues in the community. The next Building Bridges Meet and Greet – for members of the news media – will be held later this month and others will be scheduled in the future.

Hendrickson also represents the County around the community by presenting proclamations for cultural events, attending speaking engagements and local festivals, and serving on community boards.

You can find out more about the County's Community Outreach Program and how to get involved at www.gwinnettcommunityoutreach.com.