

IOWA'S HERITAGE IS THE FOUNDATION OF GOOD CITIZENSHIP

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Introduction

Under the leadership of former Governor Robert D. Ray the Iowa Sesquicentennial Commission developed a mission to “educate, celebrate, and commemorate Iowa’s past and present as an opportunity to focus on Iowa’s future.” Iowa’s Sesquicentennial Celebration, commemorating 150 years of Statehood, was a landmark success and continues to be a model of statewide mobilization across the country. Beyond the fact that the sesquicentennial engaged Iowans in every community and county, the most significant aspect of the celebration continues to evolve with the vision that Governor Ray laid out that the reflection on our past and present should be used as a tool to make Iowa an even better place to live, work and raise a family—a lasting legacy that would enhance the quality of life in Iowa both now and for the future.

That lasting legacy is facilitated through the Institute for Character Development (ICD)—a non-profit organization founded by the Sesquicentennial Commission and Chaired by former Governor Ray that is dedicated to the mission of enhancing civility through character development. The essence of this mission is rooted in the heritage of our great state and was born of the numerous opportunities that evolved through the Sesquicentennial.

Iowa's Unique Sense of Community

In 1995 the Smithsonian Institution Center for Folk Life and Cultural Studies embarked on a statewide research project to identify Iowa’s contemporary community culture to be showcased as part of the Festival of American Folk Life on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. This unique opportunity to showcase our state to the nation and the world was an exciting and historic component of Iowa’s Sesquicentennial Celebration.

What the research brought forward, and what was ultimately demon-

strated on the Mall by Iowans from across our great state, was what the Smithsonian captured as a unique sense of community. Something that, in our Iowa humility, we take for granted—and the Smithsonian captured as an enduring element of our contemporary culture that is not found in other states across the country.

Another component of the sesquicentennial was a thought provoking coffee-table book published by Meredith Corporation titled “Iowa—A Celebration of Land, People and Purpose.” Amidst the beautiful Iowa pictorials, authors Hugh Sidey, Connie Mutel, Mary Swander, Craig Canine and Michael Martone captured in moving words that sense of Iowa’s place and heritage that has fostered an evolution of community spirit, civility, character and citizenship that indeed sets Iowa apart from our peers.

One more significant initiative of the Sesquicentennial was the first ever comprehensive Iowa Heritage curriculum that was developed in partnership with the State Historical Society of Iowa and funded by Pella Corporation. With the vision and leadership of Michael Zahs, Loren Horton, and numerous other Iowans committed to our heritage this project was taken “off the shelf” and fully developed and delivered to every school and library in Iowa. The significance of this work cannot be underestimated in the power to bring Iowa’s story home to a new generation of our sturdy stock. A compelling message in the engagement of Iowa’s heritage reflected in this curricular piece is the sense of community spirit, born of our rural agrarian nature, to help our neighbors—good citizens.

Focus on Civility and Character Development

With these elements in mind: statewide mobilization, national validation of the significance of Iowa community, moving words from some of our finest authors capturing our sense of place, and a reflection of our heritage for our young Iowans, it is not surprising that the lasting legacy Governor Ray envisioned and laid before the commission, and all Iowans, would be an opportunity to enrich our lives with a renewed focus on civility and character development.

The fabric of our society is based upon important universal principles—that trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and good citizenship shape who we are and what we will become. An individual who makes good decisions--discerns right from wrong, and does the right thing for the right reason embodies the qualities of a “good citizen.” The essence of our

community and culture, where we engage with each other from the pre-school to the corporate boardroom, is based on our sense of civility in our relationships with each other.

This evolving focus is certainly embodied in the CHARACTER COUNTS! framework that ICD fosters and develops across Iowa. The success of the initiative is community engagement that the Six Pillars of Character (Trustworthiness, Respect, Responsibility, Fairness, Caring, and Citizenship) are attributes that all of us want to see more of in the lives we live.

The success that is being achieved through CHARACTER COUNTS! initiatives across Iowa are rooted in our strong sense of historical place and heritage. One of the dramatic opportunities to develop good character and citizenship is the proactive process of service learning—across curricular pedagogies.

Character in Action is Demonstrated by Service

The Iowa Department of Education defines Service Learning as “a method of teaching and learning which engages students of all ages in solving problems and addressing issues in their schools or greater community as part of their total education program”—a good definition of citizenship as well.

True service learning incorporates eight researched-based critical elements:

Community Need / Voice: If we are to solve problems in communities and provide authentic learning opportunities for young people we must make sure we are actively engaging the community in identifying needs.

Learning Objectives: Essential to service learning is understanding what young people are expected to learn through their service. Developing learning objectives provides an opportunity to identify what young people will learn on a personal, social and intellectual level.

Youth Voice and Planning: Listening to and engaging young people in the planning process provides ownership and learning opportunities for all involved.

Orientation and Training: Young people must understand the organization, issues, and skills required to provide effective service to maximize learning.

Action: The actual service experience itself requires much planning

and thinking. There are logistics that are important to ensuring a meaningful experience.

Reflection: In the reflective process young people use critical thinking skills in order to learn from their service experience.

Evaluation: Assessment of process and impact is critical to the success of future engagements.

Celebration and Recognition: When young people provide valuable service to the community, their efforts need to be recognized and celebrated. This reinforces their value and their connection to their accomplishments.

Conclusion

Service learning is one highly successful means for the enrichment and development of character and good citizenship. Rooted in our own sense of Iowa heritage, service learning brings home the concepts that make concrete the abstractions of service to others. It also creates an emotional link to community, development of core principles such as the Six Pillars, and the embodiment of the nature of a “good citizen.”

When I think of the Iowa I grew up with, our Iowa of today, and the Iowa we hope to enrich for the future, I glean perspective from attributes that are rooted deeply in our sense of place and heritage. I think of the concepts that encourage us to do our share, be a good neighbor, care about and pursue the common good, volunteer, protect our natural environment, participate in making things better, help the community, play by the rules, respect authority and law, obey those who have been given authority, and honor and respect the principles of democracy. These are action items of our collective heritage and the cornerstone for our future.

The essence of our heritage, and the legacy of Iowa’s Sesquicentennial through the work of ICD, is to maximize our human potential to act upon the principles of good character and civility—one person, one decision at a time. In so doing, we will continue to be a state—and people—recognized and acknowledged for our character and good citizenship.

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