



VALLEY BREEZE PHOTO BY BRUCE MCCABE

ALICIA TILLSON serves homemade American Chop Suey to her 8-year-old daughter **LORELEI**. Last Thursday 15 local parents who hope to become community leaders gathered for Parent Leadership Training Institute at NeighborWorks Blackstone Valley's C3 Center in Woonsocket as part of a 20-week program about the intricacies of their communities and local government. The session starts with a free home-cooked meal that they can enjoy with their kids. Childcare is provided during the classes.

Creating leaders: New program aims to get Woonsocket parents engaged

By **SANDY PHANEUF**
Valley Breeze Staff Writer

sandy@valleybreeze.com

WOONSOCKET – “Parents want to be involved in their kids lives and don’t know how to do it,” said Kyla Foster of RiverzEdge Arts Project. “Knowing the community and

knowing how the government works builds the confidence to participate.”

It was on that premise that the Parent Leadership Training Institute was founded in Connecticut more than 20 years ago and the same principle that’s given Foster the tools to train a group of 15 local parents who now hope

to become community leaders. The program, which has expanded from the neighboring state to 27 sites across the country over the past decade, was brought to Woonsocket this year through a 21st Century grant at RiverzEdge.

“They’ve found a pretty

See **PARENTS**, Page 23



VALLEY BREEZE PHOTOS BY BRUCE MCCABE

Before the leadership training session, **SHANE CULLITON** enjoys a meal while his son **LOGAN**, 6, does his homework. Last Thursday, 15 local parents who hope to become community leaders gathered for Parent Leadership Training Institute at NeighborWorks Blackstone Valley's C3 Center in Woonsocket as part of a 20-week program about the intricacies of their communities and local government. The session starts with a free home-cooked meal that they can enjoy with their kids. Childcare is provided during the classes.

PARENTS

From Page One

amazing way to engage parents," explained Foster, coordinator of the new annual 20-week long class. "It's a very deliberate curriculum that empowers people."

Woonsocket's first PLTI class is now in its 7th week, and Foster says she can already see the potential impact it could have on the community through the individual parents.

"You realize so quickly that the number one reason they're there is they want to better the lives of their children," said Foster. "Then you realize how important one individual parent can be to the community."

The first group of parents came to the program either through a referral, or by responding to a flyer outlining the PLTI mission. To qualify for the free class, held from 5 to 8:30 p.m. each week at NeighborWorks Blackstone Valley's C3 Center on Sayles Street, parents must submit an application, and take part in a brief interview where Foster aims to gauge their feelings about diversity.

"For the most part, people won't be rejected," Foster said. "But because the curriculum is very, very intense, some people may not be ready for it."

The class is geared for all ages, genders, races, income levels and ethnicities.

"We want diversity," said Foster. "On the application, we don't ask education level because we want the parents with a Ph.D. sitting next to the parent that might not have a degree at all." Teen moms can receive high school credit for the class as part of their Expanded Learning Opportunity coursework, but administrators from the Woonsocket Education Department can also receive professional development credits. In Connecticut, where the program is well established, several universities offer credits for the program.

The first 10 weeks of class focuses on the parents learning about themselves as leaders.

"In order to gain the skills and

the confidence to participate in civics and democracy, you have to learn about yourself first," said Foster.

With classes titled "The change process" and "The intentional use of language," PLTI aims to confront barriers to participation. Diversity is a key component of the organization's philosophy and the curriculum helps parents to examine their feelings on the subject.

"Right off the bat, you start talking about race and diversity in your community and you find that especially in that first 10 weeks, it can be very emotional," Foster said. "It sounds sort of cheesy, but if you want to be a leader in the community, you have to be open-minded to working with people who have different opinions."

In the second 10 weeks, classes focus on local business and local government, and on skills, like how to read budgets and who to contact to get things accomplished.

"It's all about giving parents a tool kit for civics and democracy," Foster said on the non-partisan curriculum. "You need to know the bills and the laws that are being made in your community because they are affecting your child."

Classes are interactive and activity-based, with no Powerpoint presentations allowed. Each three-hour plus session begins with a group dinner, and childcare is provided, along with services such as transportation or a translator for parents who might need one. The presence of such accommodations is mandated by the national team as a means to make sure all parents are able to participate.

The participants, in turn, must sign a contract saying they won't miss more than three of the 20 classes.

"It's a big commitment for the parents," said Foster.

In a recent session, parents were divided into two groups. One group was asked to share a story and the other was told, in advance, not to listen. The listening activity, predictably, angered many of the storytellers. In another session, a group was asked to defend segregation.

Over the 20 weeks, the par-

ents are reminded of an important rule of PLTI: Trust the process.

"Parents learn these skills by actually experiencing them," said Foster. "It makes people mad, but it's part of this deliberate curriculum." After each activity, the group takes part in discussion and self reflection. "It will all make sense by the end of the class."

So far, from an evaluation sheet filled out by participants after each class, Foster has found "there's nobody that is not enjoying this."

The course ends with each parent completing a community project, ranging from a one-time volunteer opportunity to running for mayor.

"It really depends on the individual's interest," said Foster.

One parent has already decided that she wants to join PLTI's Civics Design Team to help recruit Spanish-speaking families.

Currently, that team is made up of other community partners who have helped RiverzEdge to implement the program. The Civics Design Team includes Woonsocket Police Chief Thomas Carey's wife, a doctor from Thundermist Health Center, and several members of the Woonsocket Education Department.

Classes will begin every January, and although the funds to start the program came through a grant, facilitators will have to get creative to cover expenses from the weekly dinners to materials like pens and paper.

"We're being scrappy," said Foster. "We need as much help as we can get to continue this."

In addition to monetary help, Foster is hoping supporters can contribute the occasional meal for the group's weekly dinner, or help with childcare. To learn how you can help, contact Foster at kyla@riverzedgears.org.

"It's about bettering the lives of children in the community," Foster said of PLTI. "Parent engagement is something that I think everyone can agree can be very, very difficult. It's so inspiring to already have a group of people who are so dedicated to the community."