

08/01/2007

Phoenix Project seeks 'social entrepreneurs'

By: Frank Mustac

Former Virginia Gov. Mark Warner (D) played the roles of both guest speaker and expert-panel moderator at a July 25 luncheon in Merrifield that was hosted by a nonprofit group called the Phoenix Project.

Founded in January 2006, the Phoenix Project is a statewide organization with a mission to educate and engage Virginia's next generation of social entrepreneurs and nonprofit leaders, especially those engaged in revitalizing Virginia's economically and socially distressed communities.

"I am here today not so much as a former elected official, but as someone who, in a modest way, was a social entrepreneur himself," Warner told a room at the Fairview Park Marriott filled with more than 200 luncheon attendees, including state and area elected officials as well as leaders from several colleges and universities.

Warner said that, before he became governor, he helped start the Virginia Healthcare Foundation and was involved in the start of several other social entrepreneurial ventures in the commonwealth.

"Social entrepreneur" is a relatively new term that describes someone who comes to the nonprofit sector with not only a desire to do good but who also tries to bring business concepts to the task that distinguish their ventures from old-style nonprofits.

Organizations like the Phoenix Project are important, Warner said, because they are helping to ensure the recruitment of the next generation of nonprofit leaders.

"Baby boomers are starting to retire, and many of our larger nonprofit organizations are run by boomers, so there are enormous challenges and opportunities before us," Warner said.

"That is why we have an increasing demand for social entrepreneurs," he said. "I believe that the responsibility and the burden on the nonprofit sector will continue to grow."

Another main speaker at the luncheon was attorney Greg Werkheiser, a founder and executive director of the Phoenix Project.

A former speechwriter for Warner, Werkheiser said that, although Virginia is a prosperous state, one of the best managed states in the nation, one of the best states in which to do business, and one of the best places for young people to get an education, the accolades do not hold true in all parts of the commonwealth.

"Not in the places where 750,000 Virginians still live and work in poverty that is inconsistent with our character and potential," said Werkheiser, adding that, even in nearby Lorton, in the wealthiest congressional district in the nation, one out of 10 children grow up in poverty. "I have seen these disparities firsthand, and, yet, instead of despair, I have been filled with hope," he said.

For more about the Phoenix Project, visit www.phoenixproject.org.

©Times Community Newspapers 2007