

2007 Leading Light Award

Nominees for this award must have contributed to a program or project which has created an environment of positive change over a 3-5 year period in one or more of the following categories: Student Achievement, School-Community Connections, Education Advocacy and Career and Technical Education.

This year's winner has been influential in all four categories. They also satisfy the requirement of providing model programs that can be replicated statewide, and they have successfully done so. This is the first time that a municipality has been selected for this award. I'm pleased to announce that the recipient of the 2007 Leading Light Award is Eagle Nest, a partnership between the City of Delray Beach and the Palm Beach County School District.

The City of Delray Beach is one of the few Florida municipalities that sponsors an Education Board for its schools. This board is chaired by a full-time city employee and meets regularly to discuss educational issues in the city and to develop suggestions for improvement.

The city further distinguishes itself through its support of the Eagle Nest Construction program. Now in its third year, the Eagle Nest/City of Delray Beach collaboration continues to thrive and develop.

In 2005 Atlantic Community High School approached the city with a proposal to build affordable housing with their support. After extensive negotiations, the city agreed to donate a vacant lot to the program. To further support this initiative, the city's Community Redevelopment Agency promised to fund Eagle Nest for two years, with a \$150,000 zero interest construction loan.

Eagle Nest agreed to sell the completed house to the city's Renaissance Program for affordable housing. With the profits from the sale, Eagle Nest will repay the construction loan and retain the remaining funds. The city and Eagle Nest will continue the process with the next phase. Eventually, Eagle Nest will become a fiscally self-sufficient high school construction education program, as homes are built and sold to the city.

The city supports Eagle Nest in other ways. The local Chamber of Commerce accepts donations to Eagle Nest and gives tax deductions to participating businesses. The city's finance department also provides bookkeeping for Eagle Nest at no charge.

In addition, the Delray Beach Planning and Zoning Department is very involved in this process. Professionally, the city works with Eagle Nest through code enforcement, inspections and helpful tips to the novice workers. City employees have also taken a special interest in the project, as many know at least one student who is an Eagle Nest worker.

Eagle Nest is unique in that it is a residential construction project that is "kid-designed and kid-built." Prior to construction, the city sponsored a design competition to select the final version that eventually became the Eagle Nest blueprint. Like other residential construction projects in the city, Eagle Nest has to adhere to all codes and requirements. Eagle Nest is not given preferential treatment and must meet all applicable building and zoning codes. City inspectors can "red flag" the project at any time during the construction process.

Recently a city inspector reviewed a student's work on a porch column. After looking the column over carefully, the inspector placed his

hand on the column and pushed it over. After further evaluation, the inspector reported that the column was not straight. The stunned looks on the students' faces reminded all of them that quality is an important part of the process, and the consequences of failure to meet standards is one of life's best lessons.

Eagle Nest has been named as a mentor program by the State of Florida, with five schools across the state replicating the Eagle Nest model in the "Matchmaker Grant" program.

Delray Beach has received the "Partner in Education Award" from the Palm Beach County School District for the past two years. The Florida Career Pathways Network has also recognized Eagle Nest as a "Best Practice."

Overall, Eagle Nest is a highly evaluated school project. Eagle Nest has met and continues to meet all benchmarks required by the city. This first phase of the Eagle Nest project will be completed by June 2008.

Eagle Nest's mission is to help high school students learn a valuable career skill while, at the same time, providing a service for the people of the City of Delray Beach. We at SUNSPRA salute their efforts to enhance education by increasing student achievement, supporting career and technical education, developing connections between school and community, and serving as an advocate for public education. It is now my pleasure to present the 2007 Leading Light Award to Janet Meeks, Education Coordinator for the City of Delray Beach, and to Dr. Art Johnson, Superintendent of Palm Beach County Schools.