

# Junior League of Arlington honored for turnaround at national convention

By Faye Reeder - Special to the Star-Telegram

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Misty Lockhart, right, and Kristi Graves-John attend the 2013 May Junior League of Arlington dinner and meeting, where awards were presented and officers installed. The two are cousins who joined the league at the same time, in fall 2012. Junior League of Arlington

Five years of declining membership and a corresponding fundraising deficit could have spelled disaster for the Junior League of Arlington.

But a can-do, proactive reaction to the situation by the organization's leaders has dramatically turned things around and resulted in a 400 percent increase in new members and a national award.

To make it happen, a budget task force was formed in 2012 to work with a special quick-action membership committee and the board of directors to develop plans for addressing the issues.

"As indicated by our shrinking new member classes and regular member attrition, we knew that something about our membership model wasn't working," said President Jeannie Deakyne.

"Though our membership and revenue circumstances were not unlike those of other nonprofits, our league was responding to the growing needs of one of the fastest-growing metropolitan areas in America. With fewer members and less funding, our ability to organize and deliver meaningful community impact was truly becoming a challenge."

A multifaceted membership initiative dubbed "Appreciate! Collaborate! Educate!" has resulted in a 15 percent increase in total membership in just over a year.

## National attention

The program received attention last month at the 92nd annual Conference of the Association of Junior Leagues International in St. Louis where 700 Junior League leaders from around the world were in attendance.

Deakyne and Junior League of Arlington President-elect Emily Swanson were presented the association's 2014 membership development award during a ceremony honoring only 10 leagues from among the 250 represented at the conference.

The annual award honors "programs that respond to the diverse needs of League members and create supportive environments, resources and services for their development." A cash prize was part of the award.

"What [Arlington's] members did in a very short period of time is remarkable," said Ellen Rose, president of the New York-based Junior League association. "Facing a decline in both membership and fundraising, the league was having difficulty making a meaningful impact on its community.

"With true Texas spunk, it pulled itself up by its bootstraps and implemented a turnaround plan to regain financial security, sustain membership and engage members at all phases of their league careers in creating community impact."

A new approach

Junior League of Arlington leaders, under Deakyne's guidance in her former role as membership vice president, started by doing extensive research, which revealed that the most significant area to address was matching up a membership model with the lifestyles, time constraints and skill sets of the women the organization wanted to attract as members.

Deakyne explained that the old model used required new members to complete a 10-month training course before becoming an active member.

In a bold move, the new program created a "semester model" offering dual admission times in August or in January at which new members become active members ready for a volunteer service placement in the community after a concentrated four months of training.

Misty Lockhart was among the women who participated in the first class under the new system.

"I felt like the new semester-long provisional program was designed specifically for me — today's modern working mom. It provided me the opportunity to join an organization I had supported for years but couldn't seem to find time for," she said.

Lockhart said the flexibility of the program worked well with her job demands. After only two years as an active member, she was selected to serve on the board.

The success of Arlington's initiative has attracted attention from other leagues across the country. Deakyne said leagues from California to Florida have contacted Arlington's group to find out not only what its program looks like but also how it was able to get its membership to adopt it.

Two years into the new model, Deakyne believes that most of Arlington's members can't imagine their program any other way

Along with changes in the admission process, an Emerging Leaders Institute was established, offering a skill-based competencies curriculum to prepare 28 members to rapidly assume leadership positions in the organization and in the community within four months.

Two successful classes have generated plans to increase the scope of the institute and open it to the community at large in January.

Also, increased volunteer recognition through various forms of public appreciation along with a mentoring program and monthly get-togethers enabling members to connect with one another were designed to engage members more effectively.

Responding to member satisfaction surveys, the Arlington league now partners with community organizations to complete one-day projects that have an immediate, visible impact. Many members say these short-term volunteer opportunities mesh with the other demands in their life better than the 10-month community placements that were more common in the past.

The recent boost in membership — Arlington now has 500 members — means lasting benefits for members and the community. Getting the award means more than simply bragging rights.

“It celebrates the commitment of their volunteer members to enthusiastically live the Junior League’s vision as women around the world who are catalysts for lasting community change,” said a spokeswoman for the Junior League association.

“The strength of JLA’s membership has been, and will continue to be, founded in the opportunities that we provide women to connect with each other and impact our community in meaningful ways,” Deakyne said. “Our notion of ‘community’ grows every day, with an increasing portion of our membership living or working in every city in the Mid-Cities area.

“We have a real opportunity to impact North Texas — with Arlington at the center of our mission.”