

# DELEGATE To DELEGATE: 'WE HAVE To Do SOMETHING'



THE PRESIDENTS' SUMMIT  
FOR AMERICA'S FUTURE

BY SUSAN J. ELLIS

The delegates from Austin filtered into Room 103C of the Philadelphia Convention Center, along with delegates from other, similar-sized cities. They were returning from the Summit's opening ceremonies at Independence Hall. Filled with images of Presidents and Hollywood celebrities, they knew that it was now time to get down to the real work of the Summit.

As they settled in, just about everyone expressed the desire to learn as much as possible from one another. Like many other delegates, Austin Mayor Bruce Todd acknowledged that he arrived in Philadelphia with "uncertain" expectations. "This is as much about attitude and personal commitment as about the how-tos," he said.

During the hour devoted to sharing specific programs, Margaret Williams described a mayoral initiative in Boston, where they have mobilized a city-wide initiative to teach children to read. The quarter-million university students in the Boston area are seen as ideal volunteers. High school students have been recruited as "Reading Raiders" with the task of identifying pre-schoolers not in day care centers and needing early reading support.

Deborah McHamm described Cleveland's "One Hundred Men Reading" program in which African-American men -- ranging from corporate chief executive officers to barbers -- spend at least one hour per month reading to pre-school children. The project had to overcome the obstacles of convincing the men that they had the time and educating parents and teachers that this was a good idea.

"We started only with ourselves and volunteers, and now we find we need a coordinator," McHamm said, but "this is an easy program to replicate."

The still-new model of Family Pathfinders was explained by Lucy Todd of the Austin delegation. Developed by the Texas Comptroller's Office in Austin, this statewide, inter-faith effort matches teams of three to eight volunteers for one year with families coming off welfare. The team supports job finding and keeping and helps with problems that ordinarily "fall between the cracks" such as automotive breakdowns.

## Sharing ideas

At the break, one delegate spoke for everyone in the room: "I was impressed by the rich range of options I heard at my table and the incredibly unbearable cost of not doing anything."

The next day, following the only plenary session for local delegations, everyone convened by state and heard summaries of the intensive discussions the day before. Mayor Todd began Austin's report with his group's vision statement: "The greater Austin community will be a place where all children will be safe, healthy, and have a chance to reach their potential."

The group set a measurable goal of a 100 percent increase in volunteers working with youth -- but first acknowledged it must do a baseline survey to learn who is doing what now. Austin also developed a timeline for a local Summit, to be held in September to coincide with the start of school. This included a strategy to engage those with a "sense of exclusion" because only 10 delegates could be sent to Philadelphia from their city.

Waco reported two responses to the question: "How will you sustain linkages after the Summit?" They vowed "to keep in touch and to spread the word." They reminded delegates that many in the room were already active with important organizations, such as the Texas Municipal League, the Conference of Mayors and countless professional organizations. They urged everyone to "put the Summit's issues on the agendas of the conferences of these organizations." The Texas Commission on Community Service promised to be the clearinghouse to receive reports from all the communities and then set up a Web site to share the information with all.

## Special guest

Without much fanfare George and Barbara Bush appeared. Relaxing among his Texan friends, former President Bush reflected: "The danger of the Summit is that it is dismissed as glitz and nothing happens ... but [it] has exceeded my expectations in terms of enthusiasm and participation." He said he was proud that, despite their many differences, the leaders "kept politics out of it."

While the Bushes posed for photographs, the Austin delegates shared their thoughts as the Summit was reaching its close. Lynn Thompson, director of Big Brothers/Big Sisters and a self-proclaimed skeptic, allowed that the Summit was "better than I expected." She

# DELEGATE To DELEGATE:

*continued from page 14*

liked the mixture of cities in the first session because it helped avoid political turfism.

Donald Loving of Communities in Schools observed that it was "a remarkable process of coming together ... I didn't think I'd get as jazzed up as I have because I was not expecting the [high] level of involvement of the national leaders." He was "impressed by the focus on prevention, on solutions," which, he said "may be the biggest paradigm shift of all."

To the nodding agreement of the others listening, Patrick Flood of Austin Metro Ministries explained how he was affected by "youth here being front and center." He said, "We usually compartmentalize youth, seniors, and others. I won't do that so much any more."

Before leaving, delegates were asked to consider their own "personal commitments." The Austin representatives listened intently to their fellow Texans around the room:

- "I learned that the most important thing is to have youth involved."

- "I will make a difference in children's lives through their parents."

- "I pledge to ask a person in my community who I thought was too busy or too important and try to hook him up with a child."

- "I see a new definition of family ... the coaches, mentors and other volunteers are the new extended family."

- A middle school principal vowed "to secure a mentor for every child in my school."

One person offered her organization's mentoring curriculum to everyone "as a gift to the effort."

After pledging his Episcopal Church to give "100 scholarships to neighborhood kids," the clergyman ended the session with a prayer. On the way out, Donald Loving reflected on the obligation of the Austin delegation and the whole Summit: "Once we go public, we have to do something."