

Alumni Spotlight

Neva Rountree and Dr. Ludovico Villanueva



Editor's note: To celebrate the progress and accomplishments of 30 years of LSS, we're highlighting alumni and significant individuals responsible for the success of our organization during this anniversary year. In this e-newsletter, we invited two special and influential people responsible for beginnings of LSS: Dr. Ludovico (Ludi) Villanueva and Neva Dixon Rountree, to share their insights and advice.

In 1985-1986, Ludi Villanueva, a psychiatrist, served as President of the original Sandy Springs Chamber of Commerce (SSCC). His theme was "Building the Sandy Springs Chamber and Responding to the Needs of the Business Community" and, with the aid of his search committee, recruited Mrs. Linda V. Gilman as executive director for the SSCC. Gilman then reached out to Neva Rountree, a public relations professional who owned a PR firm, to join the Chamber, and Rountree agreed on the condition that she could start Leadership Sandy Springs. "As a long-time resident of the area with a business based here," said Rountree, "I thought it would have significant benefits over time by adding to community cohesiveness. By becoming more informed, people can be motivated to effect change in their 'hometown', as well as create opportunities for cross-community segments to become more aware of each other and local challenges."

Villanueva facilitated the overall process of bringing key people together to galvanize change, and Gilman and Rountree created the structure for the organization through a Foundation Committee.

Using two primary models, Leadership Atlanta and Leadership Georgia, Rountree arranged for influential leaders from each to provide insights to guide the process. Additionally, she consulted with the late Mayor Eva Galambos for her perspective of the important issues of the area, and many meetings later, the first program days began to take shape.

"Program days were exciting, said Rountree, "and brought individuals together to learn about local issues as well as the broader picture." Much like today's classes, there were group meetings and chances to have personal interchange with people who mattered in their respective fields. "My favorites were Law Enforcement and Media Days - thus we had the opportunity to ride in a night shift police car and query representatives of major media organizations from the Atlanta Journal-Constitution to CNN!"

It took 30 years for Sandy Springs to become a city, and LSS class members and alumni were a part of the ongoing efforts reach its city status. As people became more informed, for example, with meetings of our state and county officials, the advantages of becoming a city emerged. One of the LSS projects was as the "sign toppers" in which LSS class of 2000 helped install Sandy Springs signs atop street signs throughout the 25 acres of unincorporated Sandy Springs to promote a sense of community and provide visibility.

Like any organization, LSS evolved and grew that first 10 years and Rountree shared how starting an organization is in many ways just like starting a business. Her staff at Rountree Group Public Relations helped with media outreach to make it "real." Class recruitment via publicity and board outreach followed, in which Villanueva was instrumental. Planning the first retreat and the class days were both highlights and challenges as they looked to model parameters for subsequent years. One of Rountree's favorite memories was creating a logo, brochure and collateral material. "All of a sudden, we looked 'legit!'" And throughout the progress and development, Villanueva was often behind the scenes supporting the organization through board development.

As the city grows and matures, there will be more opportunities and challenges, and one of these is the growth in diversity and changing demographics. "LSS is poised to be a catalyst for continuing positive outcomes for our local area and region," said Rountree. "The scholarship opportunities and youth program for LSS are excellent steps." Villanueva commented that LSS has done very well as an organization and has grown from having one paid Executive Director to having a full paid staff.

Villanueva added, "Leadership Sandy Springs has done a lot to bring in graduates to its programs; LSS is like graduate school. The role of each class is something we all should be proud of, because they take time to find out the best way to serve the community as well as the organization."

"It seems like we just celebrated our 25th year of existence," concluded Villanueva. "We must have been having fun for time to swiftly pass. We look forward to another 30 years of meaningful participation in the life and work of Leadership Sandy Springs. Now, in year 2017, LSS moves on."