

## Leadership weekend brings Metro East students together

CARBONDALE, Ill. – Nearly 40 high school students from the Metro East area came to Southern Illinois University Carbondale recently to learn more about lifelong learning and leadership roles at the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute’s 15th annual Youth Leadership Weekend.

The leadership weekend, Sept. 30-Oct. 1, featured William R. “Bill” Norwood, SIU alumnus and pioneering African-American pilot, and Michael Rashid, IlliniCare Health CEO and plan president and CEO. Workshops and panel discussions focused on enhancing the leadership qualities of African-American young men reinforcing positive qualities, building skills and increasing career awareness education.

“Watching this group of young men take part in team-building exercises and learn life skills from such an impressive group of speakers and presenters was truly heartening,” Jak Tichenor, interim director, said. “There can be no doubt that this program is truly life-changing and ultimately, world-changing. The volunteer mentors who work with the teens in their neighborhoods, schools, and social organizations in the Metro East area throughout the year are crucial to the program’s success. We are deeply grateful for their tireless efforts on behalf of these wonderful young people.”

In a selection by their peers, two participants, Willie Robinson, Jr. (Omega Psi Phi Project Manhood) from O’Fallon Township High School, and Mahlik Good (Alpha Phi Alpha Lights of Alpha Mentoring Program) from Belleville East High School, earned the event’s Paul Simon Leadership and Character Award. Robinson and Good each received a plaque and new iPad.

Many of the students attended previous conferences have gone on to enroll in colleges and universities and returned to leadership roles in their communities. Oliver Keys, an East St. Louis native, participated for four years and earned his degree in automotive technology from SIU Carbondale. Keys is a service and parts area manager with Fiat Chrysler Automobiles (FCA) and

helps plan and participate in the annual event, inspired by institute founder, the late U.S. Sen. Paul Simon, D-Illinois.

Simon and Mike Lawrence, who succeeded Simon as institute director, used a 1994 report by the Illinois Commission on African-American Males as an inspiration for the leadership weekend. Former Illinois Attorney General and SIU Carbondale alumnus Roland W. Burris chaired the commission.

“When Mike Lawrence and I first sat down with Paul, his goal at the time was to find a way of building African-American male leadership in the Metro East area,” Linda Renee Baker, institute/university professor and project director, said. “We certainly believe we have met and exceeded those expectations because we have been tracking these students over the past 15 years and we can see the impact this program has had in helping them chart successful careers and meaningful lives.”

The event planning team consisted of local educational institutions, fraternal organizations and other community-based agencies, Baker said. Those groups include Alpha Pi Alpha, Top Ladies of Distinction, Kappa Alpha Psi, Omega Psi Phi, SIU Edwardsville Charter School and the East St. Louis Community College Center.

Cedric Mitchell, Caseyville, has helped plan and chaperone the event since its beginning in 2003.

“I can't think of a better gift than helping to develop youth, exposing them to opportunities, and shaping their thoughts of self, community, and humanity,” Mitchell said. “Today's young males are bombarded with negativity, unfavorable temptations and disillusionment while Youth Leadership Weekend spurs dreams, plants the seeds of possibility, and helps secure the promise of a better future.”

Norwood, a retired United Airlines captain, veteran, and former SIU Board of Trustees member, stressed the importance of self-discipline and hard work, saying “success in life results when preparation meets opportunity.” Each student received an autographed copy of Norwood's book,

“Cleared for Takeoff: A Pilot’s Story of Challenges and Triumphs.” Norwood, a Centralia native, served in the U.S. Air Force, had a 31-year career with United Airlines where he was the company’s first African-American pilot, and was the first to achieve the rank of captain. He is a founding member of the Organization of Black Airline Pilots and is a Lincoln Laureate in the Lincoln Academy of Illinois -- the highest honor for outstanding achievement given by the state to people who were born or who lived in Illinois.

Rashid, meanwhile, urged students to strive for success while remembering to help others.

“There is no better way to spend a life than in service to others,” he said.