

Jumpstarting a Powerful New Professional Network

The invitation went out in the spring. "I want you in," it began, "on the ground floor of a project extremely close to my heart—something that, in hindsight, I've been working toward my entire career."

The source of the invitation was Ann Drake, former CEO of DSC Logistics. The recipients were young women from across the country. It was an unlikely start for a professional network: These women did not know each other. But a single thread connected them: All had benefitted from scholarships funded by Ms. Drake to advance women's leadership. Some of the invitees were alumni scholars from AWESOME (Achieving Women's Excellence in Supply Chain Operations, Management, and Education). Others were from the MBA program in the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University. A third group were alums from Kappa Alpha Theta, a sorority at the University of Iowa dedicated to personal excellence, leadership potential, commitment to service, and intellectual curiosity.

Come to an event, the invitation promised, where they would all meet each other and kick off "a sisterhood that could be life changing." The site: The campus of George Williams College (GWC), adjacent to land where Ms. Drake is founding a Center for Women's Leadership in Williams Bay.

Thirty women accepted the invitation and came to Wisconsin on a Friday evening in early August. Some flew into Chicago or Milwaukee and were shuttled to the retreat; others drove themselves. The weekend began with a relaxed dinner in a private home near campus. That night, the women slept in the George Williams College dorms. Each guest had her own room and bathroom.

Saturday kicked off with early morning yoga and/or a walk along the shorepath of Geneva Lake. A light breakfast and coffee followed in the architecture-award-winning Mable Cratty Hall on campus. Mid-morning, Ann pulled the participants together for welcoming remarks and an icebreaker exercise to help them get better acquainted. Professor Ellen Taaffe, author of *The Mirrored Door*, spoke to the group on ways women can

challenge their self-imposed obstacles to success. After her talk, lunch was served, with dessert and refreshments on the verandah overlooking Geneva Lake.

Work resumed after lunch with participants taking themselves through a personality assessment to learn more about their individual leadership style. A panel discussion on networking followed: What are women looking for now in an effective network that will advance their own careers and empower women overall? Ms. Drake closed the afternoon by sharing personally about her own leadership journey. The session concluded with dinner and discussions at each table about *The Five Graces of Life and Leadership*. While some turned in after the meal, others lingered by the fire to talk into the evening.

Sunday morning began with a light breakfast and an hour of dialogue with Ms. Drake as she outlined hopes and plans for the women's leadership center rising next door. A discussion of *The Five Graces* book and sharing of insights from last night's conversations followed. The retreat closed with participants summing up their insights from their time together and celebrating the new relationships they are taking with them.

What began as a collection of individuals ended as an inspired collective. "I'm not sure I have all the words to properly communicate the impact this weekend has had on me," wrote one participant after the weekend. "From the moment I arrived ... until the moment I boarded the shuttle to Chicago, I felt welcomed, valued, heard, and seen. That alone is remarkable."

Yet the greatest impact she felt came not from the hospitality but the dream behind it.

"This weekend was one of those moments that I'm sure will sit with me for a long time," this young woman wrote. "I see your vision ... and want to be a part of it. This is powerful, life-changing, worthwhile work. Thank you."