

Leaders in the Civic Engagement Movement: President Mark Gearan

by Lorraine Hoyt

March signals the second installment of our monthly *Leaders in the Civic Engagement Movement* series. This issue features Mark D. Gearan, Chair of the Talloires Network's Steering Committee and President of Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva, New York.

Gearan's commitment to civic engagement started with a bike.

"I was probably 12," Gearan recalls. "And I remember riding my bike around town, passing out leaflets and campaigning for Father Robert Drinan." Drinan would go on to win a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives and become an important mentor to Gearan. "He, along with my family, taught me the importance of working for meaningful change through community service, education and politics. Those were lessons that stayed with me throughout my career."

As Director of Communications and Deputy Chief of Staff in the White House, Gearan says he was able to see firsthand the dedication of those who serve through politics, and, as Director of the Peace Corps, he witnessed what he describes as, "...a window into the energy and political potency of young Americans abroad."

As chair of both the Board of Directors of the Corporation for National and Community Service and the National Campus Compact, Gearan has been "close to the transformative effect of service in the U.S." Today, with nearly 60 percent of Hobart and William Smith students studying abroad and all of them involved in some type of service work, he is focused on graduating a new generation of global citizens who see civic engagement as a way of life.

Hobart and William Smith Colleges, where Gearan has been president for 12 years, were founded in Geneva, N.Y., in what was, at the time, the frontier of the United States and what would later become the birthplace of the Women's Rights Movement. "Community has always been important to the Colleges, whether through the creation of a community on the frontier or advocacy for an inclusive community through the women's rights and civil rights movements," says Gearan. "Given that, it's not surprising that Hobart and William Smith have also always prized community service and service-learning."

In his view, Gearan inherited a "solid platform" and has "worked over the years with faculty, staff, students and community members to expand and knit the Colleges with the people of Geneva." He stresses the importance of getting direction and guidance from the community, a philosophy he brings from the Peace Corps to HWS. "The most important thing a President can do to advance civic engagement is to listen to the community."

Last year alone HWS students, faculty and staff devoted more than 190,000 hours in service to Geneva on a variety of projects ranging from environmental impact work to tutoring.

Aiming to "move the needle for literacy and college readiness in the local school district,"

Gearan and his team recently adopted a collective impact model known as Geneva 2020. City government, businesses, and non-profit organizations are now working with HWS and the school system to make a material difference in the lives of children. Gearan believes such interactions give participants the “sense that citizenship means more than just paying taxes,” he says. “Students begin to understand that we have to rise and support one another in many ways.”

Gearan is eager to foster the global movement of civic engagement in higher education. “Awareness is growing among many colleges and universities,” he says. He believes “it is a worthy effort” for all types of institutions of higher education and would like to see an arena of competition such as the Talloires Network’s MacJannet Prize further developed because it “values excellence in service” and “gives students an opportunity to be part of something global.”