NC State program imbues teens with the leadership principles of GEN. (RET.) H. HUGH SHELTON '63.

Photographs by Ted Richardson
by Kristin Collins
The program draws students from around the country who spend a week living and working in close-knit teams, completing challenges and projects that serve as lessons in ethics, team dynamics and self-reflection—which can mean anything from a team scavenger hunt to a group service project.

As a typical week begins, about 45 high school students, from freshmen to seniors, arrive on NC State’s campus on a Sunday afternoon. Most don’t know any of the other participants and are unsure of what to expect. They are assigned to teams and shepherded into rooms at Alexander Hall, where they will live in close quarters and follow a strict schedule for the next week. Each day begins with a 6:55 a.m. flag-raising and physical fitness session and ends with a team meeting at 10 p.m. They share all their meals at Fountain Dining Hall. Lights must be out promptly at 11 p.m.

The students have been identified by teachers or parents as having shown promise in leadership, and all are required to have a GPA of at least 3.0. While most pay $600 for the weeklong program, the center also offers scholarships to some of its students.

Every day brings a series of carefully planned activities, designed to gradually deepen the students’ understanding of leadership and to build bonds among the participants. Many students come at the insistence of their parents, hoping only to survive the week and get back to their summer vacations. However, the program forces them to get engaged. They will spend the week swinging from high ropes in nearby Schenck Forest, tackling team challenges like the giant teeter-totter in the woods, completing a group service project such as putting.
together packets for freshman orientation at NC State or assembling care packages for troops overseas, practicing public speaking and role-playing in a variety of situations.

Many Shelton Challenge alumni say the program has transformed their lives. Anna Patton '09, now 26, says she was one of those unwilling students when she first participated in the program at the age of 16. She was already in high school student government, in marching band and served on the board of a faith group in her hometown of Clayton, N.C. “I was like, ‘Dad, I can’t believe you’re doing this to me. You’re going to put me in the woods with a bunch of kids who don’t know what they’re doing,’” Patton says.

In July 2013, Patton joined the staff of the Shelton Leadership Center as a leadership training specialist, bringing his cornerstones of leadership: honesty, integrity, diversity, social responsibility and compassion. Shelton, 72, gleaned his wisdom from two combat tours in Vietnam, a highly successful military career, high-level roles in political campaigns and his service on the boards of several large corporations. But he said his leadership education started in his hometown of Speed, N.C., where his mother was a teacher and his father was a farmer.

Shelton’s lessons came from singing in the school play, being a youth pastor at church and showing animals in 4-H. Now, he hopes the Shelton Challenge is playing a similar role in the lives of young people. Shelton says the key lesson is the same one that has guided him through his career: “A leader is someone that people trust. It’s someone whose word you can take to the bank, and someone who lives by the Golden Rule.”

In addition to his work at NC State, Shelton serves on six boards of directors, is a trustee at N.C. Wesleyan College in Rocky Mount, N.C., and travels around the world giving speeches. Still, he says that planting the seeds of ethical leadership in teens is one of his most satisfying jobs. Despite severe back problems and a busy schedule, he makes the trip from his home in Moorehead City, N.C., to speak to almost every Shelton Challenge group.

Shelton likes to tell the students a story from his childhood, about a time when several of the boys in his high school began stealing the coveted Oldsmobile Starfire spinne hubcaps. He decided not to get involved, and eventually watched several of his classmates get arrested after a high-speed chase. “The pressure will be there to do the wrong thing,” Shelton tells the group.

It’s a story intended to show students that they don’t have to be executives to practice the principles of leadership—and that sometimes leadership just means doing the right thing even when those around you are not.

Debbie Acker ‘03, assistant director of the center, took on the challenge of shaping Shelton’s ideals into a curriculum that speaks to students. For more than 10 years, she has honed a program that is carefully structured and synchronized. She breaks the students into groups of 10, each facilitated by a teen leader, a college-aged mentor and an adult instructor. The teen leader and the college mentor, and sometimes the instructor as well, are part participants in the program who now volunteer their time to help.

There are no seminars or lectures in this program. In one activity, held in Carter Hannah Gym, teams are given newsprint and masking tape and then challenged to see which team can build the tallest possible free-standing tower that is sturdy enough to hold a golf ball. Afterward, they are guided through a reflection on who was encouraging, who was helping and who was hurting the process. Each is asked to identify what their strengths were, and what areas they need to work on.

Most students are shy at first, but gradually the revelations emerge. Some realize they need to step up or speak up, but a
good number realize they have to stop rushing ahead of the group, trying to com-
plete the challenge without the help of the
team. "We try to make it a safe environ-
ment where they can fail and it will be OK," Acker says. "We’re just guiding the pro-
cess. They come up with their own goals.”

In another activity, students are assigned to groups that correlate to dif-
f erent social statuses. The smallest group, the “squares,” is given candy and back
rubs, and permitted to make the rules for the rest of the group. Members of the
largest group, the “triangles,” are denied the right to speak, sent to the corner for
imaginary offenses and forced to pick up the elite group’s trash.

During one session this past summer, some of the triangles became angry during
the two-hour exercise, while the squares happily accepted foot-rubs and imposed
rules that perpetuated their own advan-
tage. Afterward, students talked about
the power dynamics of the game—and of
society at large. The exercise forces stu-
dents to think outside their own experience.
“It really did show me that you lead by
example in whatever you do,” says Mary
Kate Morgan, a high school sophomore
from Currituck, N.C., who completed the
program last summer. “It’s not necessarily
just when you have a leadership platform.
People know whether you’re a leader just
by the way you act on a daily basis.”

SPREADING THE WORD
Leadership centers have become prevalent
on college campuses over the past two
decades, but NC State officials say
their program focusing on high school
Students celebrate their success on the
high-ropes course (above) and as they
get ready to graduate after a week at the
Youth Shelton Challenge (below).

“The Shelton Leadership Center, which was founded in 2002. Gen. (Ret.) H. Hugh Shelton ’63 agreed to lead it shortly after
leaving his post as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The
center’s other work includes:

The Shelton Leadership Forum
This national forum is held each November at NC State. It brings
together leaders from the corporate world, academia, commu-
nity agencies and government, as well as NC State students, to
teach the center’s model of values-based leadership and create
dialogue among leaders.

Student Scholarships and Career
Development Programs
A privately funded endowment provides need-based scholar-
ships to students who display leadership potential, integrity
and commitment to community service and physical fitness.
Shelton and a national board of advisers set the criteria for
selection. Awards range from full scholarships to a few hundred
dollars to be used toward the cost of the weeklong program. The
center also provides training and mentoring to select students.
In the church, I was selected to be of things where I had to assume a leadership role. In the school play that was put on every year, my father was a farmer. I had to sing and my father was a farmer. I had to sing in a team together.

What does leadership mean to you? It’s not about who you are at what you are. It’s about bringing people to you wouldn’t do. A good leader is also a good follower. I think any leader realizes that it’s not about him or her. It’s about bringing a team together.

How do you instill leadership in young people? Character development starts in the home. It starts with the parents. It extends into the school and into the church. [The Shelton Challenge] is just another step in developing their character, and at this point in their lives, stressing how important things like integrity and diversity are.

How was leadership instilled in you as a young person? My mother was a teacher and my father was a farmer. I had to sing in the school play that was put on every year. My mother kind of thrust me into all sorts of things where I had to assume a leadership role. In the church, I was selected to be a youth pastor. I had to get up and give a sermon. I was on a livestock judging team in 4-H and I had to stand in front of judges I’d never seen.

What do you most want students to understand when they complete the program? One thing that I’d like for them to walk away with is that the foundation of leadership is built on one word: integrity. A leader is someone that people trust.

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