

Re-creating Our Future

By Susanne Deitzel

Today, Mike Whitehead has a comfortable view. His office, the helm of Whitehead Associates, Inc., sits in a Victorian manor nestled in three acres of land off of Sardis Road, which he owns.

The Whitehead Manor executive center is filled with color, light, fresh flowers and cups of freshly brewed hot tea. Whitehead sits in a coat and tie atop an ancient rocker, just across from his computer screen splashed with pictures of his kids.

Whitehead's job is executive consulting. He conducts group and individual leadership, culture and team development for many of the most prestigious and successful companies in the area, who pay a considerable sum to share his point of view on their business.

What they may not realize is that he had to pay a lot to learn what he knows.

Adversity Yields Diversity

If there were such a thing as a school of hard knocks, then class 101 would have to be Whitehead's childhood.

Born Terry Michael Gladden in Columbia, S.C., Whitehead's early childhood was spent in poverty. At the age of 6, he and his four siblings entered the foster care system. The children were separated into different homes; Whitehead's mother died and his father passed away shortly thereafter.

From the age of 6 until the age of 14, when the Whitehead family adopted him, he lived in three orphanages and 13 foster homes. His life became a kaleidoscope of different families with their incumbent religions, wealth or lack thereof, race, disposition, and values. As a child he felt exposed to almost every permutation of family there is.

He explains, "My childhood, as I experienced it, was adverse and diverse. I lived with wealthy families and I lived in poverty. I lived in the city and the country; I lived among atheists, Catholics, devout Christians, black and white families, kind people and abusive people. Needless to say, it wasn't an easy existence for a child."

If Whitehead's story were in today's newspapers or on television, you would expect to read about it in the crime pages, or worse, the obituaries, because as truth would have it, that is where a lot of lost kids end up. Fortunately for Whitehead, and for everyone whose life he touches, that isn't his story.

"Looking back now, I can see that I went through what I did to be able to make a difference. While I was living through it, it was difficult. But if it weren't for that experience I wouldn't be who I am or be able to do what I do," he explains.

A Vital Transformation

Whitehead's disparate childhood stands in marked contrast to his steadfast demeanor and confidence today. As president of Whitehead Associates, he answers calls from high-level executives looking to take their business to the next level. By assessing, deconstructing and reconstructing a team, corporate culture or leadership style, Whitehead Associates outfits a company to break out of habits and perceptions that threaten to limit its potential.

And this is a task for which Whitehead is uniquely qualified. Whitehead received his master's degree in counseling and development, and received accolades for several years with the consulting firm Dorrier Underwood before beginning Whitehead Associates almost 10 years ago. He is a voracious reader and seminar attendee, and participates on too many non-profit and leadership organizations to count – so he has the credentials of many of the consulting firms that are pervasive in today's marketplace.

But Whitehead brings something more to the table, and that something it is evident from the first time you lock eyes with him. Because, in order for this extremely successful businessman, real estate investor, coach, husband and father to get where he is, it took a lot of soul searching, and a lot of hard work.

Recalls Whitehead, "Since my family didn't have much money, I didn't know exactly how I would pay for college, but I had an entrepreneurial sense and a powerful drive to find out what made people successful and to find it for myself. As it happens, I was a pretty good, if scrappy, basketball player, which helped me get accepted into Winthrop University. I knew if I made it in, I could figure out a way to pay for it."

And pay for it he did, through grants, loans and working through school with homemade ideas like a birthday cake/care package delivery service, microwave rental service, and being a resident advisor at one of Winthrop's dorms.

But college didn't take the way he thought it would. "In high school, I was good at basketball, I was the class president and I was voted 'Most Dependable,' but I didn't make great grades. My early college experience was the same, and I began to doubt whether or not I belonged there."

He continues, "It turned out I wasn't good enough in basketball to graduate to the varsity team, but I wanted to stay in school just to feel like I could finish something. But something kept telling me that I wasn't as smart as other kids."

At this point, Whitehead's story takes a dramatic turn. A psychology professor introduced him to the "seven types of intelligence," as defined by Howard Gardner, which suggested that he scored very high on interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence. Then, a public speaking professor, who later became his mentor, helped him make the breakthrough that would change his life.

He recalls, "On the first day of class this professor told us that we could return our textbook – that this class was going to be all about us, and learning how to speak authentically. I was terrified, but her honesty, sincerity and genuineness was too striking for me to drop the class. Of course, our first assignment was a speech on our family and our childhood."

"I planned on giving a canned, sterilized, and generic version of what my experience was, but when I got to the words 'foster home' I clammed up. At this point she convinced me that whatever I had to share was okay, that I had something to offer, and then I was able to tell my classmates about my past. It was a defining moment, because that decision and the relationship I took away from that experience freed me to look at my life as an asset instead of something to just lock away," he shares.

Cultivating Inspiration

From that point forward Whitehead was able to focus on his strengths, and he realized that what he did with his life could be predicated on the choices that he made, as opposed to the storyline he had been handed. "I suddenly recognized that my life did not have to be determined by the fact that I was an orphaned kid. I could choose my outcomes, and this was an awakening."

Whitehead says that he still had to overcome pretty rigid armor in terms of relationships, but that through the conversations with his professor, meeting his extraordinary wife, and working intensively on personal development, he found both the support and guidance that he needed to be up to the task. He laughs, "In college, I was a bit of an odd bird. There were more than a few occasions where I had to miss a party so I could deliver some birthday cakes or attend a Wayne Dyer seminar. But, I was consumed with finding out more about myself and other people."

When Whitehead graduated from college he enjoyed enormous success and gratification as a teacher in one of Charlotte's most challenging middle schools. He was voted the school's teacher of the year, and he attributes this to being able to identify with the kids. "I had experience in what they were going through; I had been them. So, I intuited ways to reach them."

Whitehead exhibits the same versatility in the corporate world. "Because of my diverse history, it is just as easy for me to relate to an employee on the factory room floor as it is the president of a major corporation. If it hadn't been for what some people call an unfortunate childhood, I might not be able to do that."

The same can be said of community building. "I have been in the projects. If I were on the street talking to a homeless person today, they would have no idea of the privileges I have unless I tell them. It is just easy for me to identify with people."

Whitehead has been able to turn his experience into strength, and leverage that into a currency that has become extremely valuable to the corporate world and the community.

Effectuating Change

With the strategic savoir-faire of his partner, Tom Lane, Whitehead has developed a practicum that promises to transform the organizational landscape of many businesses central to Charlotte's framework. Whitehead Associates converts the self-limiting constructs of people and organizations that stand in the way of setting and meeting their goals, into the power to achieve substantive results.

One such business is the grocery store chain, Harris Teeter. President Fred Morganthal says that Whitehead Associates has been an integral part of developing its team, leadership and culture. "Colleges spend a lot of time on practical business knowledge, but a lot of people still graduate without knowing how to truly manage people. One of the things that Mike is able to do is take a person and teach them how to inspire and be effective with other people."



Mike Whitehead, Founder and President

Adds Morganthal, "Mike can take a player and turn him into a coach, and he can take a coach and turn him into the general manager. He can take what it takes some people three or four years to learn, and teach that lesson in three to six months."

Morganthal says the results speak for themselves. "Mike's training increases the proficiency of individuals and teams, and operational performance follows. We have internal measures that demonstrate that the success factor of the individuals who go through Mike's training is above 90 percent. His training improves efficiency, turnover and the bottom line. It is noticeable to the point that you can overhear people talking about it in the halls."

Scores of companies including Ameritrust Mortgage, Adams Outdoor Advertising and Leadership Charlotte, to name a few, could line up and say the same thing about Whitehead Associates and Whitehead's impact on its culture. He is his own walking testimonial, despite the fact that until now, he has rarely divulged his personal story outside of sessions with his clients. But his name is on the lips of many business and civic leaders, and he hopes that by spreading his enthusiasm we can transform the community that we live in.

Comments Whitehead, "Whitehead Associates is a results-oriented organization that has repeatedly demonstrated positive change in many Charlotte businesses, and Whitehead Manor is a great training ground for us to do that. But in addition to everything we offer here, we want to invite discussion to encourage positive change in our community as well. There are many avenues to make a difference, and we need to tap into our vast leadership resources, merge our focus, and envision a credible, optimistic future for our economy, our businesses, our schools, our kids and families, and our city."

And if anyone can do it, Mike Whitehead will make believers of us all.

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Principals: Michael T. Whitehead, Founder and President, Tom Lane, COO and Consultant
Employees: 8
Business: Management Consulting; Leadership Development, Team Development and Culture Development
Sampling of Clients: Harris Teeter, Wichova, Ameritrust, Mortgage, Tyler2 Construction, Leadership Charlotte, Adams Outdoor Advertising, Mecklenburg County BAR, Leadership Institute, CFI Security
Sampling of Civic Involvement: Dowd YMCA, Alexander Children's Center, Jacob's Ladder Job Center, Substance Abuse Prevention Services, Charlotte Advocates for Education, Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools
www.whiteheadassociates.com

Susanne Deitzel is a Charlotte-based freelance writer.

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