

DAILY NEWS

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NEW YORK'S HOMETOWN NEWSPAPER

Where Leaders Learn Fellowship provides a how-to on public affairs

News and Views | City Beat | Monday, May 20, 2002

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Artz for NEWS

Aviva Argote trains at Coro New York Leadership Center in lower Manhattan.

Good government is no accident.

Berating hack politicians and the bloated bureaucracies that seem to serve them rather than the public interest makes for lively conversation all over the world.

But the reality is that thousands of people pursue careers in public service as a way of giving something back to their communities. Many spend countless hours each year learning how to do their jobs better—essentially how to make government work.

Many of them train with Aviva Argote at the Coro New York Leadership Center.

“My mother always said you should leave this world in a little better shape than you found it,” said Argote, herself a former Coro fellow.

“This job is the best way I have found to do that. “With five centers around the country - in San Francisco, Los Angeles, St. Louis, Pittsburgh and New York - and a sixth planned for Kansas City, Coro’s local programs include a fellowship in public affairs; a Youth Leadership Initiative for students 12 to 18 years old; Hoops and Leaders Basketball Camps, a mentoring program for high school students; Leadership New York, which provides training for midcareer professionals, and NYC Issues 2001, a training program for prospective City Council members.

The word Coro was coined by the lawyer and investment counselor who founded the organization in 1942.

Next month, the group will honor “Mr. New York,” the late real estate tycoon and city booster Lewis Rudin, with a public service award bearing his name.

Last month, 64 recent college graduates from across the country—12 from the city—went to Coro’s lower Manhattan offices as part of their preparation for the group’s national Coro Fellows Summit.

Coro fellows work for nine months in private and public agencies across the city. Argote said that after the Sept. 11 terror attacks—which temporarily displaced the Coro center—the dozen New York fellows saw duty with the Police and Fire departments, relief agencies such as the Red Cross and various city agencies.

Several also worked with the Mark Green and Michael Bloomberg mayoral campaigns, as well as with newspapers and television and radio stations.

“What Coro does is give them access to the people who make decisions, whether that is an elected official or someone at the Rand Corp.,” Argote said. “Part of the mystique of Coro is that the program allows fellows to see where privilege and power meet. The whole thing is set up to help them understand the structure of an organization, how it works and how decisions made there affect other agencies and companies across the city.”

Fellows spend about four weeks at each assignment, during which they tackle a project relevant to the host organization and write a report about it. The report is filed with Coro and shared with the host agency - Argote said recommendations made in many Coro reports have been incorporated into legislation in Albany.

“This is a rigorous and intensive program,” said Argote, which is why thousands of applicants vie for the 64 slots available nationally each year.

Fellows are selected based on several criteria, including life experience and personal expertise, Argote said. Most importantly, “They have to be self-starters who know how to work with people.”

KeySpan Corp. CEO and New York City Partnership Chairman Robert Catell and former city Police Commissioner Bernard Kerik will receive the first Lewis Rudin Award for Public Service during Coro’s Commitment to Leadership dinner June 10.

Rudin’s many civic accomplishments included founding the Association for a Better New York and keeping the U.S. Open tennis tournament in the city.