

Bridges helps prepare students for life

Summer program provides resources, discipline and self-confidence for promising young people to thrive in higher education.

While Furman's focus during the school year is college students, the summer showcases the university's ties to the community. Our weekly lakeside concert series attracts thousands of music lovers each Thursday night, and more than 20,000 people attended the festive Fourth of July celebration. This summer the university has hosted nearly 12,000 people — sports campers, business executives, government organizations, gardeners, high school students, educators, musicians, marching bands and amateur athletes representing 94 groups, every state in the nation and numerous foreign countries.

One of these summer programs — Bridges to a Brighter Future — is having a life-changing impact on some promising young people from Greenville County. Now in its sixth year, Bridges provides high school students who normally would have little hope of attending a four-year college or university the resources, self-discipline and academic confidence to thrive in higher education.

Made possible through an endowed gift by Mamie Jolley Bruce of Greenville, the Bridges program hosts 100 students (25 from each high school grade)

from throughout Greenville County. Many of them will be the first in their family to graduate from high school.

The Bridges experience begins the summer before their sophomore year, when students enroll in a one-month residential academic camp at Furman. They return to the camp each summer until they graduate from high school, and they also meet several times throughout the academic year for further counseling and support.

Students participating in the Bridges program come from supportive but economically disadvantaged families. They have strong grades, good disciplinary records and display academic promise. The ethnic diversity of the group reflects Greenville's changing demographics. About one-third of the group is white, one-third African American and one-third international.

While the primary focus of Bridges is academic — the students are tutored by some of the top high school teachers in

Greenville County — it is also about developing maturity and expanding horizons.

This summer, for instance, the students visited the Martin Luther King Center in Atlanta. They sat in on courtroom proceedings, attended an Atlanta Braves baseball game and took tours of *The Greenville News*, city hall and the county library. They visited a local automobile dealership, where they learned the basics of purchasing and maintaining a car. They also learned about another sobering subject — the cost of automobile insurance.

The Bridges programs also seeks to nurture in students respect for others, responsibility for their own actions, empathy for those who are hurting and the importance of community service. They work for Habitat for Humanity, collect litter along the highway, paint city playground equipment and serve food at area soup kitchens. They also are coached on their table manners and social etiquette. Evening workshops focusing on teen pregnancy, drug abuse and sexually transmitted diseases help Bridges students avoid the pitfalls that ensnare too many of our teenagers.

The Bridges program also emphasizes the arts. Students attend recitals, plays and art classes. They learn about stock investments, how to send e-mail and surf the Internet and basic first aid skills. The daily pro-

gram, which begins at 8:40 a.m. and often lasts until 11 p.m., leaves little time for television. Students are supervised throughout the day by Greenville County teachers and Furman student interns.

As part of the second- and third-year curriculum, Bridges students complete university admissions applications and take part in mock scholarship interviews. This year, Bridges students took field trips to 12 area colleges, including Clemson, the University of South Carolina, Lander, Erskine and Greenville Technical College.

Of the 24 students in the first class to complete the three-year Bridges program, 19 are now in college. In the second graduating class, all but one student went on to attend college. A popular Chinese proverb proclaims: "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime."

The Bridges program is intended not simply to keep students busy during their summer months; it is designed to help them develop the skills to lead productive, self-sustaining lives. Imagine if we could enroll a thousand students in such a program rather than a hundred. Imagine.

■ David Shi is a historian, writer and president of Furman University. His campus address is 3300 Poinsett Highway, Greenville, SC 29613, or send e-mail to david.shi@furman.edu.



David Shi