

# Program offers students a brighter future

*Bridges is a chance for students whose potential often outdistances their circumstances.*

By Tobi Swartz

Mohandas Gandhi wrote, "Be the change that you want to see in the world." I believe that the future of our world lies with our young people. Too often, as adults, we become consumed with "our" worlds. We focus on our work, our homes, our cars, our vacations, our entertainment, our needs, often forgetting about the needs of the world around us.

For four weeks every summer, I put my world on hold and focus on the world and needs of 70 young people who participate in the Bridges to a Brighter Future program at Furman University. These students remind me every minute that they are the future of our world. They also remind me that it is so easy to take our comfortable lives for granted.

Bridges to a Brighter Future is a pre-college academic enrichment program at Furman University for Greenville County high school students whose potential outdistances their circumstances. These are students who have the potential to go to college, having an average GPA of 3.6 with 61 percent of the students enrolled in honors or AP classes. However, these students also have extreme economic, cultural or family situations that could prevent them from attaining their full potential.

Students go through an intensive process as freshmen to be one of 24 selected and attend their first four-week residential program at Furman as rising sophomores. For three consecutive summers, students attend core academic and enrichment

classes daily; participate in workshops related to character education, cultural diversity and college planning; visit colleges in and out of state; explore the Greenville community; and perform community service.

However, much of the learning occurs out of the classroom, as students are challenged to live, relate and communicate with 70 diverse young people. In a structured and safe environment, students learn valuable life skills such as trust, friendship, self-discipline, responsibility, confidence and healthy decision-making.

For all of the Bridges students, coming to Furman is not like it might be for most young people who go away from home. As sophomores, juniors and seniors in high school, many of them have never left their neighborhood. Last year, a guardian said to me, "You don't understand — this young lady lived like a person for a month. She had three meals

## GUEST COLUMN

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a day, air conditioning and her own bed to sleep in."

When they arrive, they do not bring their clothes in nice luggage that their parents just purchased for them: They come with a pillow and blanket (sometimes),

and two plastic grocery store bags of clothing for four weeks. The great thing about Bridges is that it does not matter how you come. Everyone is on an equal playing field. What matters to the students is what they do with the opportunity that has been presented to them.

Since the program's inception in 1997, students have taken the opportunity and used it as ignition to propel them far beyond their expectations. For example, a student had little vision for her future when she started Bridges in 1998. However, through Bridges, she graduated from Greenville High School, graduated from Furman University and is now in graduate school at the University of South Carolina. Without Bridges to a Brighter Future, she would not have realized her full potential.

So as you begin to take your life for granted and are manipulated by society's emphasis on

looking good and having the best material comforts, remember the Bridges students. Remember that there are young people living the change. Remember that these students' dreams, voices and visions far exceed material comforts. The Bridges students are the change that I desire to see in the world, and it is a privilege and a blessing to be touched by such fantastic young people.

One of the Bridges students wrote this summer, "In life you are given many opportunities — some good, some bad. For me, Bridges is a good opportunity to improve my future and help me to become a better person. It is a way to expand my horizons and prepare myself for college and the real world. I plan on taking this opportunity and using it to its fullest. I came to Bridges to escape, but I will continue to come for the opportunity to better my life, so I will not turn into what I am running away from."

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