

Stones of hope build brighter future for students

Bridges program at Furman University urges young people to reach beyond their current circumstances to grab ahold of their dreams.

By Judith B. Chandler

In the wake of the tragic events of Sept. 11, we are faced with two choices: renewed hope or debilitating despair. Those of us who work in the field of education are in "the hope business," day by day making a difference in the lives of young people, one person at a time.

Every day, excellent teachers all over Greenville County rise up and go about the business of making the world a better place. Done well, after parenting, it is the second hardest job in the world. These professionals deserve our gratitude and support, particularly in times of tight budgets and public criticism. Likewise, our children go to school each day optimistically to prepare themselves for a better way of life. So, hand in hand, one by one, we are involved in building the community of the future through education.

GUEST COLUMN

Judith B. Chandler is director of Bridges to a Brighter Future in the Division of Continuing Education at Furman University. She is an active community volunteer, devoting her energy to leadership development, young people and public education. For more information or to volunteer, call Dr. Chandler at 294-3135.



In the pages of this newspaper, we read daily about tragedies with national and state and local implications. I am delighted to have the opportunity to share some good news about exemplary teachers and outstanding

young people on the right track, academically and socially, throughout Greenville County.

The Bridges to a Brighter Future program at Furman University is entering its sixth year of helping deserving young people in Greenville County to "bridge" from the ninth grade to college or other post high school placement. We do not refer to these young people as being "at risk;" for in truth, all teen-agers are at risk. We call them "the best of the best," young people "whose potential outdistances their circumstances." Each year an interview team (of school, university and community volunteers) screens over 80 nominations for 24 slots for this all-expenses-paid three-year program with summer residencies on the Furman campus.

Those ninth-graders selected exhibit the following criteria: good grades, clean disciplinary records, school or community support, evidence of family financial need (such as eligibility for free or reduced lunch), and an intangible factor that we have come to recognize as "spark" —

an enthusiasm for the future and for the role of education in making dreams come true.

These young people and their families present a snapshot of our changing community: one-third are Caucasian, one-third are African-American and one-third are from international families.

A large number of our international students are Hispanic, many of whose families have fled the carnage in Colombia. One young man tells me that arriving in this country his family owned one item: an air mattress. One young woman, born in this country, kept her siblings alive by feeding them out of a dumpster on White Horse Road until a caring family, whose children were grown, adopted them. These young people exemplify the virtues of diversity and resilience.

Of our first graduating class of 21 students, 19 went to college. All but one in the second class were admitted to college. Presently at Furman, we have two Bridges sophomores, two freshmen, and one new student admitted for the class of 2007. These numbers far surpass our

dreams.

In short, these 60-plus young people, representing every school in Greenville County, are on the right track. Our job is to keep them there, providing them support and direction. Over the course of three years, they study with the very best teachers in Greenville County (9 to 5 on hot summer days); they volunteer in the community and take etiquette lessons; they visit college campuses, sign up for library cards and prepare for the SAT; they participate in student-led worship; they are challenged by a poet and two artists-in-residence; and with mentors they prepare for the future day by day. By the end of their junior years, they have model college applications ready and are savvy about financial aid.

While privately funded through the generosity and vision of one woman, this program grows yearly and is enhanced by support from many individuals, organizations, and foundations: Rotary clubs, Dr. Bill Harner, the Metropolitan Arts Council, the Junior League, the Greenville

Hospital System Foundation, Steve DeSalvo and the Greenville Braves, the poet Glenis Redmond, Furman faculty volunteers and student interns, and many anonymous community donors.

We are committed also to even earlier identification and support of deserving young people. In 2001-02 we launched Chrysalis, a mentorship program for eighth-grade girls; Catalyst for boys is projected for 2002-03. First steps have been taken in laying the groundwork for a community coalition of organizations and individuals supporting young people on the right track.

Next time you despair or falter in hope, think of our Bridges students. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote of "hew[ing] a stone of hope from a mountain of despair" "through the exercise of a creative will." Take comfort that our community is strong; we have, as our motto proclaims, "Infinite Potential." Our young people and caring adults will continue to work together, building bridges to the future, one person at a time.

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