

# Student leader gets whole school focused on diversity

Greenville High retreat a model for rest of district

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Greenville High isn't filled with racial strife, according to student body President Damaris Taylor.

But things could be better, he says.

The lunchroom is "self-segregated." Outside the classroom, students of the same race tend to congregate together.

"I think on the sports field, Greenville High is united, but I think on the social atmosphere, it's not," said Taylor, who is black.

That's why he organized a program called the Raider Diversity Retreat.

The program brought together 30 Greenville High students of various races and socioeconomic backgrounds, male and female, for a weekend at the Clemson Outdoor Lab on Lake Hartwell.

"Most of the kids did not know each other," he said.

Taylor brought in lawyers, directors of nonprofit organizations and other experts as chaperones and to assist in the program, but the students ran it, he said.

"The adults kind of stood back and watched and let us do what we needed to do," he said.

The transformation has been remarkable, according to Tobi Swartz, director of Furman University's Bridges to a Brighter Future, an academic enrichment program that aims to

help low-income students better understand their potential.

"I was at the Greenville High graduation, and the theme of all the speakers was unity and diversity," she said. "I just sat there and thought, that's all because of Damaris, because of his vision and leadership."

The Greenville County school district plans to use the Raider Diversity Retreat as a model for other schools, Taylor said.

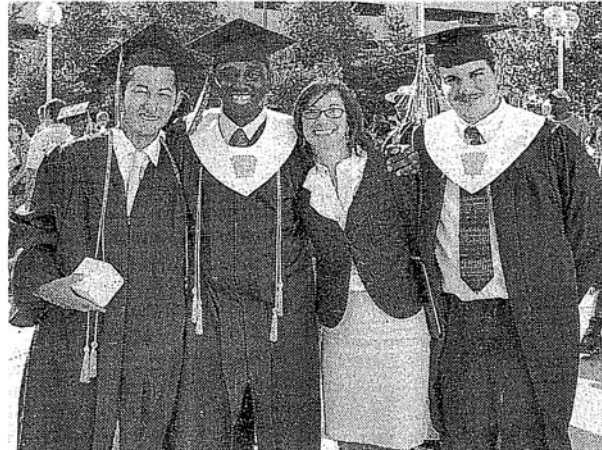
Taylor, who grew up in a single-parent home and is the oldest of five children, could be seen as an example of how to overcome obstacles to success and racial harmony, Swartz said.

He plans to continue his education this fall at Harvard University. He credits his close relationship with his mother and the Bridges to a Brighter Future among the factors in his success.

His two best friends are Luis Gonzales, who is Hispanic, and Dean Bailey, who is white. They also played a big role in the diversity program.

While Taylor is at Harvard, working on a degree he hopes to use to find a role with a nonprofit organization, the diversity program he started at Greenville High will continue.

"There are a lot of interracial friendships (at Greenville High)," Taylor said. "The problem is we feel that under the surface there's tension. And we're trying to be proactive instead of reactive to something that could come up later on."



Reader photo

Tobi Swartz, director of a Furman enrichment program, poses with Greenville High grads Luis Gonzales, left, Damaris Taylor and Dean Bailey.