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NEWS

Furman program builds bridge to college for poor, bright students

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One by one, high school students stood before their peers in a classroom at Furman University and shared their stories.

One student's parents both dropped out of high school in ninth grade while another's immigrated to the United States and never went to college.

A third student said her parents abused drugs and abused her. She learned to be thankful to have a friend's garage to sleep in so she could keep her siblings with her.

As the room listened and encouraged, each student then shared why they plan to go to college.

"It's my only way out," said one girl who said she lives in poverty and has four older siblings that never went to college.

They shared their career dreams. Veterinarian. Dentist. Computer programmer.

There's more than one common bond they all share, despite varied backgrounds, races and experiences. They know why they're here. They know where they're headed. And they know this is an opportunity that many don't receive.

They are all bright students with GPAs higher than 3.0 with clean disciplinary records and from lower income families. They are all on track to be the first generation in their family to graduate college.

And they are all getting a boost from an immersive, multi-year program with a track record of success that now stretches across 20 years.

Furman University's Bridges to a Brighter Future has become a vehicle to assist some of Greenville County's brightest, most vulnerable students with a transition to college that to

most, is unfamiliar territory.

The program began simply, with an endowed gift from Mamie Jolley Bruce, in 1996. A part-time director ran the operation and selected 21 students for the initial class from Berea, Carolina and Southside high schools. The class was named with the Greek letter Alpha.

Bridges would be set up like a camp, a home away from home for four weeks during the summer. Students would room together in university dormitories, eat together, take classes and participate in activities.

The program also would take them to colleges to get a taste of where they could be headed.

It succeeded beyond the early dreams and quickly expanded.

In 2000, it expanded to include all 14 high schools in Greenville County and now takes a selection of students from those schools and four charter high schools in the county.

Bridges added a Saturday college in 2005 so students in each class could remain connected to each other throughout the school year and learn life skills, get tutoring, work on scholarship or financial aid applications and participate in extra activities hosted by outside groups like Warehouse Theatre or 9 Round fitness.

Bridges began to take students on week-long college trips during spring and fall breaks so that by the time they graduated high school, each student had seen at least 30 colleges.

An anonymous donor allowed the program to expand its services again in 2010 to help students as they crossed the bridge into college. Bridges hosts a one-week college-prep session before students head to college and then visits each student at least once during their freshman year.

“In a lot of cases, we’re the only face they see from Greenville,” said Danielle Staggers, Bridges assistant director for college success.

Bridges staff inform school counselors about the program, and counselors recommend students to apply. Bridges receives 100-125 applications each year, interviews every candidate and selects 25 for each class. Students are then in the high school program for three years. It’s not funded by Furman University and students aren’t obligated to attend Furman, said Pam Davis, executive director of Bridges.

This year, it named its 20th class and hit Upsilon, the fifth to last letter in the Greek alphabet.

Ninety-nine percent graduate high school, far higher than the 72.5 percent of low income students who graduate high school across South Carolina.

Ninety-two percent enroll in college or join the military and 64 percent obtain a college degree or complete military service, bucking the nationwide gap for low-income students with high test scores that shows just 26 percent graduate college.

The success of low income students in college begins in high school, Davis said.

Nadia Glover was one who made it out. Born in Greenville and raised in Taylors, she was accepted into Bridges as a sophomore at Wade Hampton High School.

“I either had people who were dropping out of high school or dying due to gang violence or abusing drugs,” Glover said. “When I got to Bridges I found people who had the same background but were willing to move forward and do whatever possible to succeed.”

Glover discovered Davidson College during a Bridges college trip. She’s now a senior there and returns to Greenville during the summer as a Bridges counselor.

Bridges is now making an effort to track careers of its participants, Stagers said. Many of them have gone into social work or education, giving back to help pull others up, she said.

One, Dean Bailey, is now on staff at Bridges as an assistant director. Six others returned this summer as counselors.

Nalisha Henry, part of the third Bridges class, graduated from Furman, received her masters from Clemson University and now works for the United Way.

As a 14-year-old, she was unsure of her direction though she knew she wanted to go to college. She credits Bridges with opening her eyes to her choices.

“I’m a firm believer everything happens for a reason,” Henry said. “I was placed in Bridges for a reason, to be in this exact same situation to give back to Bridges.”

Bridges counselors help students apply for financial assistance, ensure they fill out proper application paperwork and help them apply for scholarships.

Most don’t get a full ride, but many receive a combination of different grants and scholarships that limits debt, which can be the biggest hurdle for low-income students, some of which don’t qualify for in-state pricing or federal loans, said Davis and Stagers.

The Pi class, Bridges' 16th class, received more than \$1 million in college scholarships and grants, Stagers said.

R.J. Rogers said Bridges made him realize college was an option, even for a boy whose mother died when he was 8-years-old and who sometimes slept on couches in a store because he had no home.

"Each night I would try to map out in my head at 8-years-old what I would do every night if my parents were to die," Rogers said. "I would sit in my bed and cry every night thinking about how I'm going to have to get over this if it happens."

He showered in sinks. Ate beans and weenies most nights and once made a bed out of VHS tapes with a sheet spread over the top.

"It was pretty cool, innovative. It wasn't comfy but it was what I had," Rogers said.

Then, his school counselor at Blue Ridge High School told him about Bridges and encouraged him to apply. He did, and was accepted.

"Once you enter Bridges, it's amazing," he said. "Your life changes. It really is a foundation. It's love, it's support, it's kinship, it's a family. It's something that you're proud to be involved in.

"I met guys who have been stabbed. I met guys who slept behind Wal-Mart. And I met guys who were like me and understand what it was like to go through what I had gone through."

Bridges gave him a focus and opened his eyes to possibilities he could pursue in life, he said.

"I'd never seen colleges before," he said.

He became a leader in high school and at Bridges. Last school year, he led a club of black males called Brothers of Hope. They went fishing, hiking, running and met regularly to talk. He was also selected as one of three leaders in his Bridges class.

Then, Rogers was also given a full-ride scholarship to his top choice university – Furman.

Five years after sleeping on a bed of VHS tapes, his tuition, room and board will be covered by the Herman W. Lay Scholarship to attend one of the top private liberal arts colleges in the country.

Rogers couldn't stop smiling as he talked about it.

“So much of life is what you see, what you’re exposed to,” he said. “And I’ve seen so much with Bridges. I’ve seen the cities, the monuments, my culture’s history.

“It’s really changed my life,” he said.