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Building Bridges

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Building

Outside a North Village conference room on a warm Saturday morning in April, high school students and their parents gather around tables filled with sausage biscuits, orange juice and coffee.

Someone waves hello. Another tells a joke. There are smiles of recognition. Some of these folks have clearly been here before.

Others are tentative, hesitant. They know they're supposed to be here, but they aren't yet sure how they will fit in.

It's the spring reunion for Bridges to a Brighter Future, a pre-college academic enrichment program held each summer at Furman for approximately 75 Greenville County high school students "whose potential outdistances their circumstances."

The event is a time for returning Bridges students to acquaint themselves with their friends, share stories, and reconnect with their teachers and counselors in preparation for the upcoming session, which begins in mid-June. It's also a time to welcome the newest class of students into a program that will likely have a transforming effect on their lives.

"Bridges has been a turning point for me," Cierra Riddle, a third-year participant and a senior at Carolina Academy, where she is student body president, tells the group. "For someone who has never traveled outside of Greenville, Bridges helped me step out of my comfort zone and see new and different things that I was never able to see before."

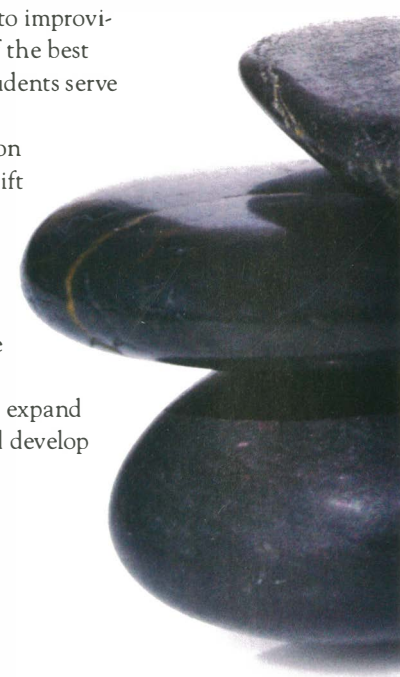
As she speaks, other Bridges veterans smile and nod. They point to Cierra as a model Bridges student, one who, like many of her classmates, will emerge from the program with a stronger sense of confidence and self-worth — and a realization of life's possibilities.

THIS SUMMER MARKED THE 10TH ANNIVERSARY of Bridges to a Brighter Future. Each year since 1998, a select group of high school sophomores, juniors and seniors have spent a month on campus in a program packed with academic and social opportunities.

To be selected for Bridges, students are nominated by teachers and counselors based on their academic potential and clean disciplinary records. The nominees then go through an application and interview process before the new class is chosen. All Bridges students come from households where the average income is less than \$35,000; many are also struggling to overcome personal and family issues.

Their days in the summer program include classes, field trips, team-building exercises and volunteer work. Workshops cover topics from career planning to conflict management, diversity training and healthy decision-making, and evening activities range from volleyball and swimming to improvisational comedy. Classes are taught by some of the best teachers in Greenville County, and Furman students serve as counselors and mentors.

Modeled after a similar program at Davidson College, Bridges was made possible through a gift from a local benefactor who wanted to help worthy students from economically challenged backgrounds prepare for college. Under the direction first of Sarah Fletcher, then Judith Babb Chandler-Huse '66 and, since 2004, of Tobi Swartz, the program has helped approximately 200 Greenville County students expand their horizons, strengthen their study skills and develop an extended family of support.



Bridges

A PROGRAM TO HELP HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS REACH THEIR FULL POTENTIAL CELEBRATES ITS 10TH YEAR.

STORIES BY JASON STRAND



Swartz says, "We tailor our activities and our counseling to fit each individual student. Every student has financial challenges, but each one also has unique personal challenges to address and overcome. And each requires individualized instruction and support. The result has been a lot of life-changing success stories."

Many students enter the program with little expectation of attending college. Bridges helps change that mindset, and assists them in uncovering the resources available at the state and federal levels.

The program's track record is strong. One hundred percent of its participants have completed high school or earned an equivalent diploma. Ninety percent have gone on to college. The average high school grade-point average for the students is 3.8, and 77 percent enroll in honors or Advanced Placement classes.

Because there are only a limited number of spaces for new students each year, the selection process can be difficult. "We typically have over 80 students nominated and have to get it down to about 25 to 30 students for each new class," says Swartz. "We interview so many bright students where

you know the program would make a difference in their lives. It's hard to say no."

Brandon Smith, a senior at Carolina Academy and a third-year Bridges student, adds, "Ones that didn't get into the program, you feel bad, because they deserve to get in just as much as I have. I wish there could be three more Bridges — a thousand more Bridges."

UNDER SWARTZ'S DIRECTION, BRIDGES HAS ADDED A SESSION called "Saturday College," which brings the students back to campus nine times during the school year. Established with the help of a grant from the Jolley Foundation, Saturday College is designed to keep the students focused on the academic and personal goals they set during the summer.

Saturday College offers tutoring, mentoring, help with college plans, and an extended level of continuity to the Bridges experience. Friendships formed during the summer session are renewed, and bonds are strengthened.

Swartz says, "I hear testimonials from the students as a result of tutoring they received at Saturday College. I am continually impressed with their level of commitment



Valuing differences

Having been a participant and a counselor with Bridges to a Brighter Future, Giovanna Gomez has a well-rounded perspective on the program.

Gomez, a member of Bridges' second graduating class, believes the key to the program's success is that it exposes students to individuals from a variety of backgrounds. A third of Bridges students are African-American, 29 percent Hispanic, 27 percent Caucasian and 7 percent Asian.

"I've had conversations with friends who say that diversity doesn't really make a difference," says Gomez, who graduated from Furman in 2005 with a degree in sociology. "[They say that] as long as you work hard, have talent and academic ability, then a diverse environment doesn't make any difference. But I disagree. I know from my own experience that being around people from different backgrounds made me think about things differently."

Having recently earned a master's degree in social work from the University of South Carolina, she says she wants to apply such values as acceptance and inclusion, both of which are emphasized in the Bridges program,

PROGRAM INFLUENCES GOMEZ'S CAREER PATH

to her future activities. "There are common threads within social classes and ethnicities," says Gomez. "These common threads make up a person's perspective, and if these perspectives are never challenged, then a person misses a whole other world of knowledge and information that could be gained from being in a diverse setting."

Gomez's parents immigrated to the United States from Colombia in the 1960s. Growing up in Greenville, she attended the local public schools and spoke both Spanish and English at home.

Through Bridges, she says, she was given the opportunity to interact with people from different cultures and environments. She came to realize the importance of understanding others' similarities and accepting their differences. "My purpose has always been to serve others," she says. "Bridges helped develop that interest."

Gomez acknowledges that Bridges has a direct impact on a limited number of students per year. But as she points out, "Bridges gives its students the skills to change their community. You learn to step back and not take things for granted. When Bridges students return



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to their homes, they become ambassadors for this way of thinking and are able to have an influence on others."

She adds, "I have a lot of memories from the program that will remain with me. My hope is that I've made a difference in the kids that I was working with when I was counselor, because I really do care about them. I hope that they see that."

on a Saturday morning. They arrive on time and focused on learning.”

One also detects a sense of ownership in the voices of Bridges students when they talk about the program (see accompanying stories). Ashlee Ware of Hillcrest High School says, “I was like an egg, and the program helped me open up.” She says she was floored by the interest others took in her life when she entered the program. “I was like, ‘What’s wrong with these people?’ I felt like for once this might be something that would be about me.”

Swartz hopes that, in its second decade, Bridges will be able to reach more students like Ashlee Ware. To do so, however, it will need additional financing. The original endowment covers about 80 percent of the program’s annual needs, with the rest coming from grants and private donations. But grants are rarely permanent, so providing for the program on a yearly basis is an ongoing challenge.

For Swartz, though, the value of Bridges goes far beyond academic development and preparation for college. To illustrate, she describes the impact of a theatre group’s presentation to the students this summer.

The group enacted various scenarios involving drugs, sex, and physical and verbal abuse. Afterward, the Bridges students divided down gender lines to discuss the performance. Swartz joined the girls, and what followed was, she says, “basically a group therapy session.”

One by one the girls began to open up, sharing painful personal stories about their lives and families. “It was heart-breaking and gut-wrenching,” says Swartz. In the end it proved cathartic, as the students released years of pent-up guilt, pain and anger. “They were crying the entire time, and after it was over, we did a hug circle. Everyone really cried then.”

For many of the students, Swartz says, Bridges is the best thing that has ever happened to them. It offers them hope — and helps them realize that they are not alone.

“I always think that it is very difficult to describe or define Bridges when I know that these are the kinds of stories that are at the heart of the program,” Swartz says. “It truly is an experience that cannot be adequately defined in words. It can only be witnessed and felt.” ❏

The author is a 2004 Furman graduate.



Perseverance pays

Jorge Jimenez is no stranger to hard work. Born in Michoacan, Mexico, he soon moved with his family to the United States to seek a better life.

As he told the *Greenville Journal*, “Nobody’s ever had a real career in my family. They just take whatever job they can. I don’t want to do that. I don’t want to switch all the time. I want to get a degree.”

This fall, the 20-year-old graduate of Blue Ridge High School — and of the Bridges to a Brighter Future program — will get his chance when he enrolls at Furman.

Jimenez’s story is one of perseverance in the face of obstacles — something that most Bridges students have in common.

When he was 16, he was forced to drop out of high school to help support his family, which includes five siblings. For a year he did various jobs, from picking peaches to construction.

The next year he was able to return to school, at Travelers Rest High. There he met Casey Crisp, who was enrolled in the Bridges program. Crisp, now a junior at Furman, recommended Jimenez for Bridges. He later

JIMENEZ’S COLLEGE DREAM BECOMES REALITY

transferred to Blue Ridge but was able to remain in the program.

Through Bridges, he says, he began to realize that college might actually become a reality — something that had hardly seemed possible a few years before.

“Bridges is about learning while having fun,” says Jimenez. “Everything we were doing encouraged me toward the idea of going to college. I realized I would need a certain grade-point average to return to Bridges and eventually go to college. I started studying a lot so I could come back. I thought, maybe I’ll get somewhere.”

Bridges also helped him understand the mechanics of applying to college. He learned how to pursue and secure financial aid, the meaning of terms such as “room and board,” how to distinguish between public and private schools. Soon he was helping friends complete their application forms.

“This is stuff they don’t always teach you in high school,” says Jimenez. “I’d talk to other people at my school, ones that weren’t really thinking about college, and they were like, ‘How did you learn this?’”



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In addition, Bridges spurred Jimenez’s interest in service work. He recently returned from a week of volunteering at an orphanage in Nicaragua, and he and some Bridges friends are hoping to start a club to promote service work in Greenville’s Hispanic community.

To learn more about the Bridges program, visit www.furman.edu/bridges.