

You Can Learn A Lot Riding the Bus

By Tina Varick

As I stood at a chilly bus stop in the glow of an Estill convenience store at 5:30 in the morning, I silently rehearsed what I was going to say to the weary parents who soon would be starting their 14-hour daily trek to work in the resort community of Hilton Head Island. I had it on good authority, the Rural Transit Authority in fact, that this was perhaps the best opportunity to secure some uninterrupted time with my very important target audience. My mission was to provide information about how they could help their children pursue a higher education and, subsequently, a higher quality of life.

It occurred to me that this "rolling parent workshop" might not be especially welcome at this hour of the morning. My audience likely would be sleepy, perhaps even a bit grumpy, and I'd be this seemingly random lady requesting their attention, trying to make them aware of the different ways they can support their children's efforts to go to college.

Many of these folks are single parents working in lower-wage jobs. They are pressed for time and money and have much more burning day-to-day worries, such as putting food on the table and paying the rent. So I certainly could excuse them if they just wanted to tip their hats forward and doze off. But I truly hoped they would listen to me.

When I accepted this position, I remember feeling excitement and anticipation at the prospect of helping so many parents and their children. Still, on this day, it occurred to me that my title in itself, "Parent Involvement Coordinator," would be a challenge to explain. Even today, as I attempt to describe our program using dull terms such as "educational performance," "business community," and "parent involvement," I often am met with polite nods and blank stares. Because they initially would have little idea what I was trying to say, I would have to dispense with formal program descriptions and be simple and direct.

Make no mistake. I knew what I was up against, so my nervousness was warranted. Again, I mentally rehearsed my lines:

"I'm here to talk about helping you and your kids make the most of their education in South Carolina."

"Your children can go to college."

"There is help available."

I already had decided to eliminate the part of my speech that covered legislative concerns with insipid phrases like "student academic achievement," "drop-out rates," and "work force development." In practical application, those don't fit neatly into my presentation. My mission is to give



The SC GEAR UP program provides services to students throughout the state, including mentoring and tutoring.

viable information to families.

Once I got started, amid the quiet listeners, I was rewarded for my well-rehearsed pitch with hesitant, sporadic demonstrations of interest. They had questions! My heart quickened as I began to respond to inquiries such as, "How am I going to pay for college?" "How much time should my children study each night?" "How do I help my child with a subject that I'm not good at?"

As the questions continued, I began to relax and develop a rapport with my audience. Contrary to my worst fears, I wasn't being heckled. Many parents recognized value in the information I had because, regardless of their circumstances, they all want what's best for their children. We all do.

I went on to explain that, in addition to workshops for parents, the SC GEAR UP program provides services to students throughout the state, including mentoring and tutoring, academic counseling, college and financial counseling, professional development, curriculum improvements, and summer learning programs. Furthermore, the South Carolina Chamber provides direct services to SC GEAR UP students by developing volunteer business mentoring and tutoring programs, business-school support partnerships, child-centered

parent involvement activities, and school-centered parent involvement activities.

As I drove home later that day, watching the Lowcountry oak trees passing by along Route 321, I was really, really tired. I tried to imagine what it must be like to board that bus at 5:30 a.m. and return long after dark every single day - and still be a parent. But many manage to do it, and do it well, but not without hardship. And I felt a sense of pride and hope that I might be able to help them just a little bit in their mission to raise healthy, productive, successful citizens. ■



Varick is the parent involvement coordinator for the South Carolina GEAR UP program. GEAR UP is funded by the U.S. Department of Education and administered by the S.C. Commission on Higher Education, in partnership with the South Carolina Chamber of Commerce, the S.C. Department of Education, the Governor's School for Science and Mathematics, and the Governor's School of Arts and Humanities. For more information, visit www.scgearup.org.