

Bus drives kids to make right choices

BY TODD LUCK
THE CHRONICLE

The Choice Bus stopped in Winston-Salem last Thursday, reminding local kids that the decisions that they make today carry consequences that will impact them tomorrow.

The bus is designed to leave its young visitors with a lasting impression. It contains a replica of a cramped jail cell and uses videos to bring students face-to-face with real-life prisoners.

Conceived as a high school dropout prevention project, the bus makes stops around the nation. Its Winston-Salem stop at the William G. White Jr. Family YMCA, and ones in Raleigh and Statesville, were sponsored by the N.C. Bankers Association.

Several groups of kids visited the bus, including those from the Winston Lake Family YMCA Achievers Academy. Upon entering the bus, they took a seat facing the back and watched a brief video that talked about dropout statistics. Dropouts make \$10,000 less a year than high school graduates, said one statistic; another said that 75 percent of those in prison are dropouts. The video then showed prison inmates lamenting their decision not to



Youths watch a video aboard the bus.

get an education.

After the video, the flat screen television was pulled to the side and the black curtain behind it was parted to reveal the 8-by-8-foot jail cell, which contains a bed and metal toilet with a sink on top, all of which are used by real inmates in prison. Facilitator Phil Christian demonstrated the loud, unnerving clang the cell door makes when shut.

The Achievers Academy kids are already on the right educational track, but the bus visit made them even more determined to stay focused on their studies.

Fourteen-year-old Chris Geter said he didn't want to end up like the people in the

video.

"I ain't trying to have a hard life," he said.

Christian — who is also executive director of the dropout prevention organization that created the bus, The Mattie C. Stewart Foundation — calls the nation's dropout rate an "epidemic," with 1.2 million students dropping out each year. He said that the method the Stewart Foundation uses isn't meant to scare kids straight, but to illustrate the hard life that could be ahead if they don't get an education.

"We want young people to understand that education is the key to ... success in life and anyone who chooses to

drop out of school is just cutting themselves short," said Christian.

Spencer McCall, the Winston Lake Y teen program director, thinks the bus is an effective prevention and educational tool.

"You can tell them these kind of things, but we don't really understand until we see it," said McCall.

The bus is in high demand and typically visits schools. Currently there's only one Choice Bus, but the Foundation wants to add nine more. The Stewart Foundation also provides an anti-dropout DVD and curriculum material used by teachers in 40 states. The Foundation also has an



Photos by Todd Luck

One of the features of the jail cell.

active speaker bureau, which includes the Foundation's founder, Shelly Stewart, who created it in 2007 in honor of his mother, Mattie.

At age 5, Stewart witnessed his father murder his mother, but he overcame tragedy and hardship to get an education and become a radio personality in Birmingham.

Ala., who was involved in the Civil Rights Movement. He also started his own successful advertising and public relations firm.

For more information on the Mattie C. Stewart Foundation, visit www.mattiestewart.org.



Members of the Moose family accept the Century Award from T.W. Garner Food's Kathy Baker.

Awards

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Garner Food Co. is a past Century Award winner, presented the award to members of the Moose family.

Others on hand for the June 2 ceremony at Graylyn Conference Center included Mayor Allen Joines, who gave opening remarks, and Wake Forest Dean of Business Steve Reinemund, who said that family businesses thrive because they

follow the "4 Cs" — Character Counts, Commitment is Constant, Customers Rule and Cash is King.

"Family owned businesses show distinctive dedication which differentiates them from other businesses because the 'name on the door' is their own," he said. "Today's environment provides a bright future for family businesses as public sentiment drives consumer behavior, employee attitudes, public policy and taxes."

Sabbaticals

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nonprofits often are selfless, driven people. They give a full measure and then more until, in many instances, they drain their personal energy."

Receiving grants this year are:

- Gregory M. Bounds, CEO of Goshen Medical Center in Faison. The center has 23 sites in five counties in Eastern North Carolina that provide primary health care for special populations, including migrants and seasonal farm workers, the homeless, uninsured persons, and those who are financially needy.

- James L. Brooks, executive director of Project Compassion in Chapel Hill. Project Compassion works to create community and provides support for people living with serious illness, and those involved with care giving, end of life and grief issues.

- Doris A. Howington, executive director of The

Wright Center in Rocky Mount. The Center is an adult day health care facility where elderly and disabled adults who need planned and supervised activities and health monitoring can spend the day. Other services include transportation and nutritious meals.

- Jackie M. Thamm, executive director of Friend of Friend Crisis Center in Carthage. The organization provides services to victims of domestic violence and sexual assault, including a 24-hour crisis line, counseling, court advocacy, child assault prevention programs and a shelter.

- Lisa D. Twiggs, executive director of Family Resources of Cherokee County in Murphy. The mission of Family Resources is "to join hands with families by providing support, information, and education so that together we build strong, healthy, productive families."

For more information about the sabbatical program, visit www.zsr.org.



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