

MEN

When MR. WILLIAMS ENTERED THE Georgia Fatherhood Program (GFP) at Albany Technical College in January 2002, the angry, unemployed father had neither the money for his most basic needs nor the self-esteem to change his situation. Even so, he proved himself a quick study and soon emerged as a top student and motivated GFP participant.

By June he had found a part-time job as assistant manager of an upscale restaurant and was maintaining an A average in his study of restaurant and hotel management. This once-hopeless man now dreams of owning a restaurant and credits GFP as the one positive factor in his life that made him believe he was worthy of a brighter future.

Success stories like Mr. Williams' are streaming out of Georgia's technical colleges and gaining attention nationwide as other states look to emulate the GFP. The program provides education, training and job placement for non-custodial parents with court-ordered child support.

"Not all fathers are deadbeat dads, but many of them are dead broke and need education and assistance in finding a job and learning how to stay on the job," says Frank Bates, DTAE's director of special workforce services. His office works in tandem with the Department of Human Resources' child support enforcement agency to implement the fatherhood program.

"The program serves as a national model for how to team state agencies with the academic community and enforcement agencies to do something positive to stop the generational cycle of non-custodial parents," Bates says.

This year, GFP will deliver services to approximately

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BY SUZETTE HILL

at Work

Georgia's
Fatherhood
Program helps
non-custodial
fathers get
the job done
as dads

*Anthony Hilson
with his son Dillon*

GEORGIA *First in Fatherhood*

A partnership between the Department of Technical and Adult Education and the Department of Human Resources, the Georgia Fatherhood Program (GFP) is the only statewide fatherhood program in the country with a multi-agency approach. It is widely recognized as one of the nation's strongest fatherhood initiatives.

Preston Garrison, executive director of Washington, D.C.-based National Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families, explains that Georgia's program is unique because it pools the resources and talents of not only the child support agency — typically the sole province of such programs — but also the technical college system, both working together in a coordinated fashion.

"There is no other effort of this magnitude in the United States," Garrison says. "Connecticut and a number of other states are moving in the direction of a collaborative approach, but Georgia has had several more years of experience."

Last year, U.S. Reps. Jack Kingston and John Lewis hosted the first-ever Georgia Congressional Fatherhood Information Forum in Washington, D.C., with 100 attendees involved in local and national fatherhood efforts gathering to glean information from GFP officials.

Frank Bates, DTAE director of special workforce services, attended the forum and made a special presentation to Sen. Zell Miller for his contributions to the development of GFP during his tenure as governor. **R**

Statewide, 70% of GFP's participants attain permanent employment earning a living wage. Sandersville Tech's GFP coordinator Ronnie Freeman, however, has raised the bar to 86% with the help of simulated job interviews.

3,600 fathers, 40 percent of whom are enrolled in a credit-hour course with plans to attain a technical certificate or degree. (Each school provides at least three technical certifications that do not require a high school diploma or GED.)

GFP clients also receive in-depth employability literacy assessments as well as career-interest inventories and training in life-management skills.

While the most popular programs with GFP participants include truck driving, welding and automotive technology, their career-interest inventories often reveal unexpected aptitudes. For example, Savannah Technical College has several GFP participants with no computer experience excelling in the Cisco networking program, says Debra Booker, GFP coordinator at Savannah Tech.

GFP's ultimate goal is to provide participants permanent employment earning a living wage — a goal that about 70 percent attain. At Sandersville Technical College, however, the bar has been raised to 86 percent. GFP Coordinator Ronnie Freeman credits the success in part to simulated job interviews conducted with participants.


"We go over grooming and dressing tips and interviewing skills, and then we do a mock interview that we tape," Freeman says. The entire group critiques the interviews and provides constructive criticism to each other.

Booker derives tremendous personal satisfaction from watching GFP participants develop personal and professional goals they had never thought possible. "Most of them come into the program very angry, with no life skills and low self-esteem," she says. "Then they learn what we have to offer and see that other men are going through the same thing. They form a support network and become each other's positive role models."

More than 85 percent of them graduate from the program with professional and personal skills that will benefit both their children and them for a lifetime. "We have one participant who had third-grade literacy when he entered the program at age 53," Booker says. "He's since completed his GED and has a 4.0 in our automotive technology program."

Another father recently completed Savannah Tech's welding program and has gone on to an oceanography school in Houston for additional training in underwater welding. "He'll make lots of money when he comes back," Booker says with satisfaction.

Money may not buy happiness — but it can provide happier circumstances. "We may never bring the father and mother together again," says Bates, "but we can make sure they provide better support for the child." **R**

A photograph showing two men sitting at a table. One man, Ronnie Freeman, is on the left, wearing a dark suit and glasses, looking at a document. The other man, David Powell, is on the right, wearing a light blue shirt, looking towards Freeman. A camera on a tripod is visible in the background.

Ronnie Freeman (left), GFP coordinator at Sandersville Tech, conducts a simulated interview with David Powell.