



Afternoons, Nadia Johnson, a Clark County Central High School junior, works in the Continuous Improvement Department at Power Partners.

Path to Success

with Great Promise Partnership

~ Story by Elaine Kalber

Students, businesses and communities all win with Great Promise Partnership (GPP).

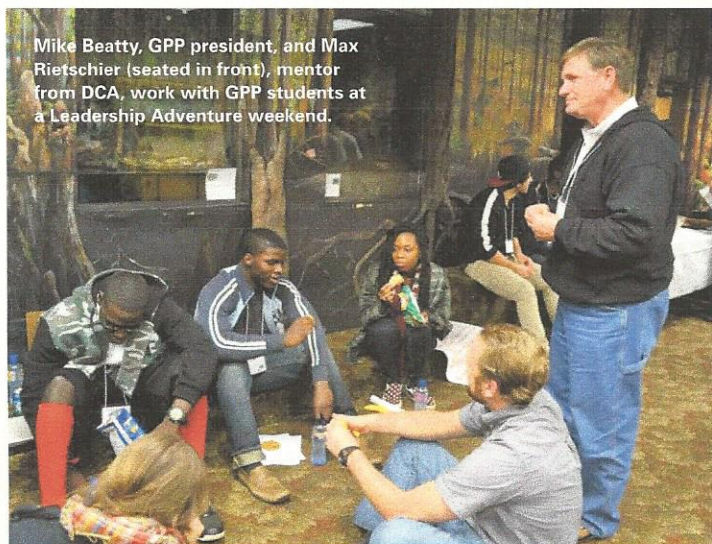
Since its founding in January 2012, Great Promise Partnership has helped hundreds of potential high school dropouts in approximately 20 Georgia counties graduate from high school while doing “a real job with a real paycheck” and find a path to a successful future.

“This is our promise to these students -- if they stay in school and work to get ahead they will have a piece of the American dream,” says Mike Beatty, GPP president and CEO. “If we do not step up, our youth will continue to be at risk of dropping out of school with the inherent possibility of a life stuck in an

entitlement culture, a life of low expectations and income, or even worse, a life of crime and incarceration,” he writes in a recent article.

Beatty witnessed firsthand the effects of low income and a dropout rate of one in three high school students during the decade he served as commissioner of the Georgia Department of Community Affairs. “We saw the poverty and the lack of education and skills that causes it,” Beatty says. “We don’t like to lose young people; those who are behind and coming from fractured families can get help. I use the phrase ‘overcoming youth.’”

“Business, school, political and community leaders are the four cornerstones that have to come together to make GPP



Mike Beatty, GPP president, and Max Rietschier (seated in front), mentor from DCA, work with GPP students at a Leadership Adventure weekend.

work,” explains managing director Lori Heemann Bodine, whose staff includes four regional coordinators, a part-time evaluator and two part-time support staff. They work with schools to identify ninth through twelfth-grade students at risk of dropping out and local businesses and industries to employ them.

“All of the students working are at least 16 years old but could be in any grade depending on how far behind they’ve become,” Heemann Bodine says. “Currently there are 416 students participating with GPP with 121 of them working.” Younger students have programs to prepare them for employment.

Pulling it all together is no simple task. “Every site is different with different employers and school systems but the main component of our help is to figure out those challenges,” says Heemann Bodine. “We look for companies that can employ the kids, not just for public relations, but who see it as a way to help train their future workforce and leadership and not just because it is the right thing to do. These are real kids doing real jobs and learning real skills.”

Mentoring and providing life skills training are also part of the GPP comprehensive agenda. In addition, Leadership Adventure Weekends at UGA 4-H Centers, such as the one in April at Fortson 4-H Camp, have trained instructors who facilitate college and career preparation, leadership skills development, team building and individual empowerment.

“These weekends also provide an opportunity for our at-risk students to just be kids and have fun,” Heemann Bodine states.

The connection between education and

employment is important, according to Heemann Bodine and Beatty, both former high school history teachers and coaches.

“When kids have not had the easiest of childhoods it is sometimes hard to explain why they need to know about World War II when they go home and there is no electricity,” says Heemann Bodine, who coached basketball and softball. “They may not have complete understanding why they have to learn history but they definitely learn why getting an education is important and how education and success at work are intertwined.”

Beatty, who coached football at Jefferson, Jackson County and Banks County high schools and represented Jackson County in the Georgia Legislature, grew up in a single-parent home and was encouraged by his high school football coaches. “GPP gives that same encouragement to students who may not be getting it elsewhere and helps them learn real-world job skills,” he says.

GPP, an independent nonprofit, has been funded by state grants and private donations but the state seed money ends next year, Heemann Bodine says, and there will be a greater need for private funding.

Beatty was inspired to develop GPP by the 12 for Life program implemented by Southwire, which manufactures wire and cable in Carroll County, several years ago. “You walk into their plant that they built specifically for the kids and it is working totally flawlessly,” says Beatty. “The kids are caught up in it.”

A family-owned business, Southwire has a culture of being involved with the community. “They looked up and said, ‘If we don’t get involved in this graduation rate we are going to have workforce issues,’” Heemann Bodine says. “We had to figure out how to scale it so we could implement it across the state with any



Mike Beatty speaks to students about life skills and what the Great Promise Partnerships can mean in their lives.

employer or size of program.”

GPP’s success is attracting the attention of many different kinds of businesses, such as Clearview Medical Center in Monroe, who currently is not enrolled or part of the program but has had a successful volunteer program for high school students. “So many of our local students have great potential,” states Emily Russell, marketing and business development director.

Does GPP work? According to Heemann Bodine, of those GPP students classified as seniors by the end of the last school year, 89 percent graduated. Of those graduates, 70 percent went on to post-secondary school (two-year-, four-year or certificate program); six percent went to the military; 12 percent went straight into the workforce; and 12 percent had uncertain post-secondary plans.

“Success is when you take the complicated and make it simple, but the frustrating thing is that there are so many different pieces of it,” Beatty says. “There may be 50,000 to 100,000 plus students who could benefit from GPP. Our five-year goal is to reach all of those kids.”

Great Promise Partners

In Northeast Georgia, GPP employers include Carrier Transicold, Caterpillar and Power Partners, Clarke County; City of Monroe, The Ellerbee Agency, F.I.S.H., Keller Williams, Walton County Government and Williamson Investments Group, Walton County; and Buhler Quality Yarns, Jackson County. Noramco of Athens provides financial support only.

There are many statewide partners, including AT&T, Electric Membership corporations, Georgia Power, United Ways of Georgia; Georgia Technical College and University systems, Student Finance Department, Communities in Schools of Georgia; USDA, 4-H/Cooperative Extension; Georgia Food Industry, Municipal and Sheriffs associations; Georgia Regional Commissions; associations of County Commissioners and Chiefs of Police; Georgia Office of Economic Development and departments of Community Affairs, Corrections, Education and Labor.

For more information on this program, visit gpppartnership.org.

Not too long ago, Cedar Shoals seniors Tyrus Curry and Raphael Cooper were having difficulties and in danger of dropping out of school. Today, they are working hard to help their families, anticipating high school graduation and focusing on the future.

Both give credit to Great Promise Partnership and Power Partners, the Athens company that has employed them since September. Both were introduced to GPP by Cedar Shoals graduation coach Ronnie Swoopes.

"Great Promise Partners has given them an opportunity to see possibilities in life and themselves that they might not have seen before," Swoopes says. "History does not dictate your future. GPP allowed me, as a graduation coach, to see them as future citizens, community leaders, husbands and fathers who will add to the overall health of this community."

Power Partners, a leading manufacturer of overhead distribution transformers, became involved with GPP last August, according to Meredith Patterson, human resources generalist.

"We want to support this program," she says. "We have difficult machines that take a lot of talent to run. This gives students a chance to learn about the responsibilities of being an employee and to see if they find the machinery fascinating. But, the more important goal is to give them a sense of worth to complete high school. It has been amazing to work with them and see them blossom."

Power Partners now has three GPP students and plans are to hire seven more by spring.



Tyrus Curry

"I was a troubled teen," says Curry. "I really thank GPP for putting me on the right track in my life. I was in the dark and they brought me to the light."

Curry, 18, now lives with his grandparents, Sarah Dorsey and Dennis Lumpkin, but he was raised by his aunt, Dynva Bailey, along with her own children. "She is now on dialysis and I want to take care of her," Curry says.

He works in quality control, monitoring tanks to make sure they are clean and have the proper pressure, from 7 to 11 a.m. and then takes online classes at Cedar Shoals in the afternoon.

After graduation, Curry plans to "stay here and grow with the

company. Financially and personally, they are good people.”

Things are looking bright for Curry, who attends Hosanna Temple with his grandmother. “I now have the ability to start life like it should be started, and I never thought that would happen. I want to be focused on life and being the family provider, and I take it seriously. I want my children to be proud of their daddy.”

Curry is goal-oriented. “If I put my mind to it everything is possible. Keep the God faith and He will lead you through.”

Raphael Cooper

Raphael Cooper, 19, grew up in a single-parent home with mom Tracy, four brothers and two sisters. “GPP has kept me stable and I am working up to my potential,” he says. “I had to get a job to help my situation—I needed to help out at home.”

Cooper, who is planning on going to college, works with the Power Partners IT team, servicing and repairing computers. “I mainly walk the shop and check monitors, going into the motherboard and checking memory or hard drives.”

He became interested in computers in a ninth grade class, and he credits his supervisor Robbie Fulcher for teaching him. Cooper also is appreciative of the library at Power Partners. “There are books on economics and other subjects so even if I’m away from school I can get a little work done.”

Cooper, who works in the morning and attends classes in the afternoon, says he has had many teachers and others “rooting



Raphael Cooper works on a computer at Power Partners.

for him” and that had made a big difference in his life. “People will help you if you help yourself—nothing is going to be handed to you,” Cooper says. “I want to be ready for the world after high school and be a real help for the family. I am happy to be able to do that.”