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Partner to give kids a chance

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By Mike Beatty

Walk into a “12 for Life” facility. See motivated young people working under the direction of adult supervisors, and you will realize something very special is going on.

I made my first visit more than four years ago while commissioner of the Georgia Department of Community Affairs. I spoke with students who shared with me their life-changing experiences. They entered the program behind academically, discouraged, often parents themselves and well on their way to becoming more of Georgia’s high school dropouts.

Through participation in 12 for Life, these students were able to graduate with futures as bright as their smiles. It was apparent to me that Southwire — under the leadership of Stu Thorn and his team led by Mike Wiggins and Richard Miller — had found a solution. They built a bridge to help these youth move from a culture of failure to a climate of success, thereby circumventing a cycle of poverty. Not only do the youth benefit by earning paychecks and graduating, but Southwire earns a profit due to the productivity of their student employees.

Later, I met with Commissioner Brian Owens of the Georgia Department of Corrections who had partnered with Monroe County Schools to institute a successful, scaled-down version of 12 for Life in Forsyth. With Ron Jackson, commissioner of the Technical College System of Georgia, and Hank Huckabee, chancellor of the University System of Georgia, we formed the Great Promise Partnership and asked Thorn to be the board chair. We instituted a successful two-year pilot with nine sites that replicated the 12 for Life process. It was extremely successful. None of our 100-plus seniors dropped out of school; 89 graduated.

Under the leadership of Stu and our board members including my DCA successor Gretchen Corbin, we are now working with more than 30 communities to place youth in meaningful jobs where they earn paychecks, help their families and finish school.

Operations as diverse as HON (office furniture), PPI (industrial products), Beaulieu of America (carpeting), Honda Lock (automotive), Caterpillar (construction equipment) and Atlanta City Hall are up and successfully running. Other companies are soon to follow. Some even plan to share common facilities

assembling, for example, pallets. This is a true Team Georgia effort with the support of Gov. Nathan Deal, Atlanta Mayor Kasim Reed and other leaders statewide.

The partnership's goal: to develop a sustainable, flexible model that is saleable throughout the state and yields benefits for businesses, communities, schools and young people. A well-trained workforce is essential for economic growth. Companies that participate will see profits go up, along with production and morale. Communities will see a pipeline of motivated, educated and skilled citizens. We believe we have the potential to help thousands of young people graduate from high school, go to college, join the military or enter the workforce full-time.

This strategy is a bottom-up, locally driven approach that engages the community in advocating and promoting these young people for the betterment of all. Our Marquee Community designation will provide recognition and incentives for communities who go to bat for these youth.

Last week, I had the opportunity to visit 12 for Life when First Lady Sandra Deal was there with Arne Duncan, the U.S. Secretary of Education. I heard eight inspired young people tell how 12 for Life enabled them to be the first in their families to graduate from high school. Duncan and his staff were mesmerized and wanted to know how 12 for Life could be replicated nationwide.

Southwire, along with a growing list of innovative companies, have stepped up and given us a successful model that works. Now all we need is for other enlightened companies to do the same. So many young people, hungry to be part of the American Dream, are still waiting for their chance.

Great Promise Partnership is committed to making their dreams come true. Are you? If so, please contact us at www.gppartnership.org.

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