

Horseshoe Farm Tutoring and Mentoring Program

Contributed by Carroll C. Phelps, LCSW, PIP, and Jamie Bryars

"I'd rather do this than watch TV!"
Kavoris, age 12

When asked why he preferred the Horseshoe Farm tutoring/mentoring program to watching television, he gave a very simple answer.

"Because this is real," he replied. {mosgoogle right}

Kavoris's words let all of us involved know that Horseshoe Farm was truly a success.

Contrary to expectations, Horseshoe Farm is not about horses; it's about relationships. This tutoring/mentoring program began in January 2007, designed to create relationships and build community with children in neighboring Hale County, located in the Black Belt of Alabama. Every Thursday, student volunteers from the School of Social Work and the greater University of Alabama campus make the 45-minute trip to Greensboro, Alabama, located in the heart of the Black Belt, to tutor elementary school students from all local elementary schools, both public and private.

The program has been an enormous success. Twenty-two eager 4th-6th grade students showed up on the first day, and a long waiting list of students eager to participate has developed since. Not surprisingly, the students were excited to have the opportunity to work with college students and just have some one-on-one attention. They subsequently brought their friends and routinely are found waiting on volunteers. One 5th grader, home sick one day, even conned his mother into checking him into school just in time for tutoring.

The program was created in the summer of 2006 when Jamie Bryars, a junior BSW student; John Dorsey, a psychiatrist in Hale County; and Carroll Phelps, an instructor in the School of Social Work at the University of Alabama; began exploring ways for University of Alabama students to work in community with individuals in neighboring Hale County. Jamie, who has a history of working with children in Hale County, coordinates the program with the help of Dr. John Dorsey. "Miss Jamie" and "Dr. John" organized volunteers from the University of Alabama and structured a program of work and play so students interact in many different ways with their mentors. The weekly activities reinforce learning and make it fun, by having 45 minutes of instruction followed by 45 minutes of games and activities.

Principals and teachers are amazed at the progress students have made, not just academically, but behaviorally. The results have been immediate. One principal commented that it had been a few weeks since she had seen a student who previously was a regular visitor in her office, crediting the student's participation in the program.

Parents are thrilled with the students' progress and have requested that the program take more elementary students and expand to tutor junior high students.

Horseshoe Farm is now a fixture in the community and a true community partnership.

The organizers added an academic component, and students from many disciplines at the university—including Honors College and the Blount Undergraduate Initiative—now participate in this service learning experience. Parents have organized to bring snacks, which is a highlight for not only the kids, but the college students, as well. Discussions are underway to expand the program to involve local high school students as mentors.

Still in the beginning stages, Horseshoe Farm is a special experience for everyone involved. The organizers hope that it will continue to have a positive impact on students and volunteers for years to come.

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Jamie Bryars is a senior social work student at the University of Alabama. After graduating in May 2008, she plans to attend graduate school at the University of Alabama to earn her MSW. Jamie has been active in her community working in conjunction with the School of Social Work and the Episcopal church. Jamie has a wide variety of interests, including mental health, substance abuse, child development, and geriatrics.