

C' students also can see a bright future

By [RICK BADIE](#) | Sunday, May 13, 2007, 03:32 AM

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He's taught at the college level. Middle and high school, too.

So Michael Woodward knows a thing or two about kids and the skills they need to get into college and succeed.

He's seen all types, but the one thing that bugged him the most were unprepared learners. Students who lacked confidence in themselves, who were afraid to speak up in class, to ask questions, make presentations. To think.

"They didn't have the tools," said Woodward, who teaches history and geography and coaches wrestling at Norcross High School.

"There was a clear disconnect between what the universities expected, and what kids were taught in the school and, of course, at home."

So Woodward culled together a free program that's geared toward metro Atlanta kids not expected to go to college. The borderline kids, those with C averages or who might not blow the SAT out of the water.

It's called the Alpha Leadership Program, a name that reflects Alpha Phi Alpha, the black college fraternity Woodward joined while earning three undergraduate degrees and a master's degree at Florida A&M.

Now in its fourth year, the program relies on volunteers, grants and fund-raisers to stay afloat. It's growing too. Reputation and mission are selling points.

In 2004, organizers expected a first-year enrollment of 15 or so students. They wound up with 35. The next year, when they thought they'd have 35 participants, 75 signed up, followed by more than 100 the following year.

This year, 125 students took part in activities that ran concurrent with the school-year calendar. On weekends, they attended sessions that dealt with etiquette, proper attire, interview skills, critical thinking and public speaking. They learned about college financial aid and how to select colleges.

A highlight was a trip to North Carolina for tours at several colleges, including Wake Forest, Shaw University and North Carolina A&T. The group visited the Bank of America Corporate Center in Charlotte, too.

"We want them all to go to college, and 98 percent of them do," said Woodward, 37, of Lawrenceville. "But we'll take getting them in the military or trade school as well."

He recalls one student well.

Sasha Johnson, a 2006 Norcross High grad whom he described as a "middle-of-the-road kid" was unmotivated about college.

"She was bright and had a great personality," said Woodward, who also runs a tutoring business in Tucker. "We worked real hard with her."

Hard work paid off.

Last fall, Johnson was accepted at Middle Georgia College. In January, she was killed in a car accident while returning to campus. Her mother, Ki Johnson, asked Woodward to speak at the funeral. Pallbearers were volunteers from the leadership program.

“These are African-American men who have families and could be doing other things, but they have decided to invest their time and money in our children,” Johnson told me.

“I am indebted to that program and if they have any needs, I’ve told them to let me know because they invested so much into Sasha.”

To learn more about the Alpha Leadership Program, please contact Michael Woodward at 678-525-3498 or e-mail: mwoodward@alphalearningandtutoring.com.

Rick Badie’s column appears on Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays. Contact him at 770-263-3875 or e-mail: rbadie@ajc.com.