



Each and Every Child



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Looking for direction, finding hope

District-wide program puts troubled teens on path to life and success

DUBUQUE – Sixteen-year-old Garrett Welter was in a fix. A self-described troublemaker who frequently skipped school, he had a bad attitude, and despised books being thrust at him. He wasn't on track to graduate.

"I viewed life as pointless," Garrett said. "I was working at a fast food

restaurant and feeling bad about myself. I would sit up at night and think about it and think about it."

And Garrett was not alone. There also is Nathan Suarez, A'diva Durrah, Dalton Carlson, Cory Bryson – to name but a few. All had different circumstances, but

all were on the same downward spiral.

If the year were 2002, their prospects for graduation – let alone employment – would be nil, said Chris Sullivan, the work experience coordinator at Dubuque's Senior High School.

But that was before HEART,



Garrett Welter

short for Housing Education and Rehabilitation Training, a program now in its thirteenth year.

In a capsule, HEART is a full wrap-around service for high schools students on Individualized Education Programs at risk for not graduating. HEART provides education, quality work experience and a stipend – all the while paving a path to good-paying jobs in the community.

HEART brings together a host of varied partners – from the school district to the city of Dubuque to a credit union, a couple nonprofits and more – to meet the transitional needs of this special cadre of graduating students.



Student A'diva Durrah stands tall during a team-building exercise.

The origins of HEART goes back to 1990, when the nonprofit Four Mounds – which includes a multi-acre estate with two mansions that today are bed-and-breakfasts – came up with the idea to recruit students to help with the estate's renovations.

"Four Mounds saw it as an opportunity to engage kids," said Chris Happ Olson, executive director of the nonprofit. "It was a natural extension of our work when HEART was created."

HEART is administered by Four Mounds, which has a three-pronged mission: preserve; educate with hands-on work opportunities for youth; and serve through developing leadership, stewardship and innovative partnerships.

Indeed, HEART hits the trifecta with Four Mounds' mission: The city of Dubuque gets much-needed rehabilitation and restoration work done on its housing stock. Students learn on-the-job skills. And then they graduate from school, eventually getting good-paying jobs and becoming responsible tax-paying citizens.

"HEART takes on projects that the city is leading," Happ Olson said. "The city provides the budget, and when our work is done, they turn around to sell to first-time homeowners. And since we started in 2003, there's nearly a 90 percent retention rate for new homeowners."

In the last 13 years, HEART students have converted 43 rundown rental units into 32 owner-occupied homes in the central part of the city. Projects range in renovation cost, with some going up to as much as \$120,000.

HEART is open to students who are 16 and older, either juniors or seniors. The typical student participates for three semesters. Once they graduate, they aren't on their own: Nonprofit Transition Alliance Program (TAP) and state agency Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services (IVRS) work with the students to either further their education or secure good-paying employment. They follow up with students until they turn 25 years old.

The program is limited to a total of 12 students who evenly split their time between the classroom and hands-on work. Class work takes place at Four



Students take a break to pose with their mentors, Tim Altman, far right, and Ron Fritz.



From left, Lori Anderson, Jason Rubel, Chris Happ Olson, Chris Sullivan, Michelle Becwar, Eli Licht, and Jean Wuertzer.

Oaks, a nonprofit that has partnered with the Dubuque Community School District.

"We have the exact same standards as if they were at Hempstead or Senior," said Four Oaks Principal Eli Licht. "We provide a rigorous curriculum for them. They need all those courses to graduate. While sitting in a classroom isn't their cup of tea, in this setting we see students whose grades hadn't been the best, but now they are typically doing very well."



Passing grades is a condition to stay in the program, as is learning to work well on a team. The students even participate in team-building exercises, such as Four Mounds' Challenge Ropes Course that requires trusting one another.

The students remain enrolled in their respective high schools, and can still participate in extracurricular activities.

Northeast Iowa Community College (NICC) is yet another partner, which teaches students tool safety training.

"We continue to look to see how we can partner more with NICC so that our students can get concurrent college credit," said Lori Anderson, the transition facilitator for Dubuque schools. "Hopefully we can keep that growing, as well."



Getting the students to find a rewarding career falls to both TAP and vocational rehabilitation agencies, both integral partners of the HEART Bridge program. The Bridge program component works to ensure graduating students continue to work toward their goals, whether it is a good-paying job or more schooling.

"As an agency, we work with students



Students in the HEART program are put through the ropes – literally – in team-building exercises.



to transition from school into the adult world of work," said IRVS Counselor Jason Rubel. "One component of it is that once they are exiting school, we guide them into the area of their career choice. While they are in school, we are working with the students with career searches and taking them out for job shadowing. We work with TAP to give them an idea of what careers are, where their interests lie and see how it compares to their aptitudes."

"Some of the more specific things TAP

to \$100 a month and are required to save at least 50 percent of the money, which over the course of three semesters can add up to a nice tidy sum. Most save 75 to 100 percent. And get this: The students' contributions are matched by yet another program partner, Dupaco Community Credit Union.

The students receive the match if they elect to use it

toward growing their career, whether it's purchasing tools necessary for a trade or heading back to school.

"As long as they are in the HEART program, money will continue to grow," said Michelle Becwar, the education impact architect for the credit union. "And as long as they use that money to further their education or career, Dupaco doubles it."

In addition, Dupaco works with students on financial literacy.

All agree that HEART works because of the commitment of many, rather than the dreams of a few. And it's the individuals – each and every one – who bring together a finely tuned ensemble.

"One of the main reasons this has been so successful is because of the two guys at the work sites (HEART Site Manager/Job Coach Ron Fritz and Four Oaks' paraeducator Tim Altman)," said Senior High's Sullivan, himself the first HEART teacher. "They have many years of experience in the construction field. They teach students everything from measuring to drywall. It's not easy, they don't learn the skills

"It's much better than regular school, and I needed these extra credits so I can graduate." Though he plans to go to a four-year school and eventually go into chiropractic practice, he's glad he's picking up the skills. "I will take these skills everywhere I go." – Nathan Suarez



right away. Their commitment and patience is incredible."

Perhaps the most important thing: The program is working. Period.

One student who graduated last year is now working, making \$15.38 an hour. In the first few months of work, he's been promoted several times, and next year he will take a class that will boost his pay to \$22 an hour.



"I'm thinking about construction or being a car mechanic. If it weren't for this program, I wouldn't be graduating. With this program, you get more experience, not only are you getting credits to graduate, but you get real training." – Dalton Carlson

does is resume development," said Jean Wuertzer, TAP specialist. "We also talk about critical components of the job skills for different types of jobs. We also have employers talk to the students about what they are looking for."

And then there's the stipend. On average, each student can earn up



"I am learning new things such as mudding drywall. It's exactly what I need to know because I want to eventually go into carpentry or welding." – A'diva Durrah

"We are painting a room that has two different shades of color on the walls because the different colors can change your mood. I plan on doing construction right after graduation to save money to go back to school for graphic design." – Cory Bryson



"He's over the moon," Wuertzer said. "He can't believe where he is."

That "he" is Garrett Welter.

"The program changed my life around," Garrett, now 18 years old, said. "The teachers showed me not only



discipline, but how to behave, to be respectful, not to have a bad attitude and to learn to talk things out."

Garrett stresses it's the educators and construction team that make the difference.

"One thing about the HEART program is how much dedication those teachers put into the students," he said. "They have put my life on track and guided me in the right direction."

His family also appreciated HEART.

"My family was just amazed at the difference in me," he said. "They saw me going from a troublemaker to making about as much as my mom."

Garrett's life change even got him thinking about someday working for HEART. But he's not so sure.

"I don't think they could pay me enough," he said with a sheepish

grin. "But I definitely will volunteer for HEART."

