

The Bray Center

by Jean Goers

GEAR UP:

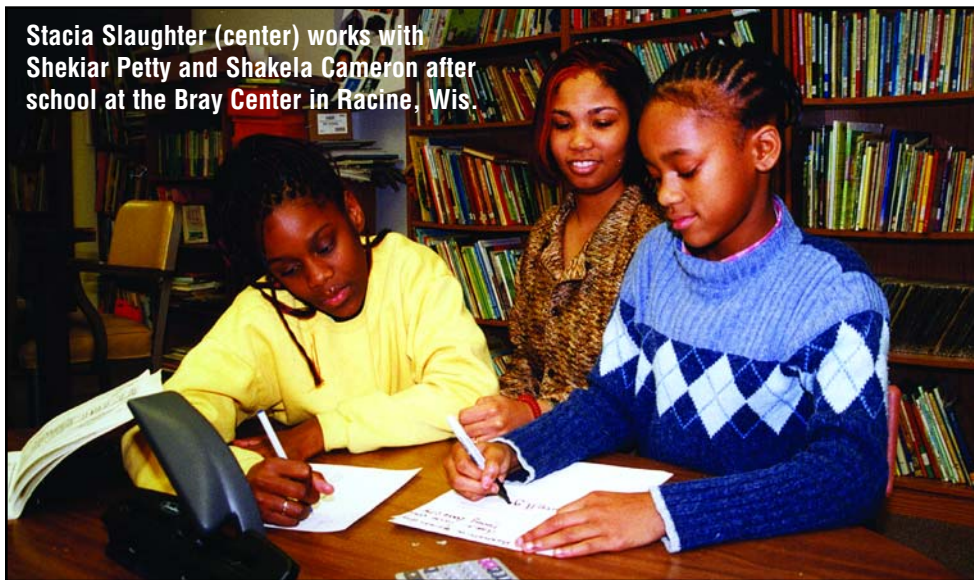
Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs

Shakela Cameron, a seventh grader at Starbuck Middle School in Racine, Wis., attends the Gear Up program each week. "The teachers are nice and treat you with respect," Cameron said. "It's a place where I feel safe and I am taught how I can get to college."

Cameron is not alone. More than 200 students participate in the weekly program during their study center or lunch period. Gear Up is targeted to sixth through 12th grade students at the public middle and high schools in Racine and is designed to assist students in their preparation to pursue higher education.

Participation is by choice, yet students rarely miss a class. "I made friends and we all remind each other that 'group' is today," Cameron said. The program is offered to students from families of financial need. If a student qualifies for reduced or free lunch, they qualify for the program. The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction provides the funding.

Stacia Slaughter, Gear Up program facilitator, said students are taught life skills including self-esteem, studying, healthy living, and goal setting. Gear Up includes



college tours and an occasional field trip. Once a year, at Days of Discovery, people from different professions come in and give the students a broader perspective of obtaining higher education.

"When students get good grades early on, they can make their career choices, and choices don't have to be made for them," Slaughter said. "If a student graduates, who may not otherwise, that is a huge accomplishment. Most students give back to the program by recruiting or tutoring other students after they graduate."

Gear Up encourages its students to participate in the Precollege program run through the Center for Community Partnerships (CCP) at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside. The CCP also helps

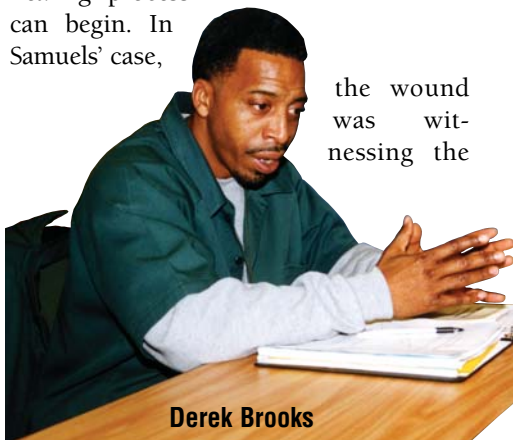
Gear Up program facilitators. Margaret Gename, professional development, and Shannon McGuire, youth programs, coordinate and offer training courses designed to enhance the ability of facilitators, like Slaughter, to work with youth participating in the program. "The CCP training programs help us develop activities which in turn allow us to offer more to the students," Slaughter said. "Our goal is to make a difference by helping someone succeed who otherwise would be left at the wayside."

"Each day we wear a different hat: mentor, surrogate parent, guidance counselor, or just a shoulder to lean on. Training through UW-Parkside's CCP helps the Gear Up staff to do a better job working with the students and their parents."

DIVERSITY CIRCLES

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Diversity Circles also has the power to open old, deep wounds – but in doing so a healing process can begin. In Samuels' case,



Derek Brooks

the wound was witnessing the

murder of his great-grandfather. "When I was in Dyersburg, Tennessee, I got the opportunity to see the (Klu Klux) Klan in action at the age of 8 years old," he said. "We went down there for a funeral, and (the Klan) snatched my great-grandfather out of the back door and took him to a tree about 150 yards from the house, the cross is burning and all this. I broke to run out the door behind him and my dad grabbed me. Nobody moved, at all, they stood and watched."

"And I had no idea that that hatred was still there until I brought it up one day. When I went back to my room I could feel it like it

was just happening. And I think that's what we, as a society, need to do – in order to feel, we need to talk. Because as long as it stays reserved and locked up in our minds and in our hearts, those feelings will go untreated for the rest of our lives. (Diversity Circles) is about treating feelings. By participating – you may not always feel good right away – eventually you will start to feel better. That doesn't mean I have to love you, but it does mean that as I start to feel better I'll start to respect you and start to understand you."

For more on Diversity Circles at RCI see *Fresh* PERSPECTIVE www.uwp.edu/fresh.