

STAR Foundation polishes job and life skills

by Leslie Lamkin

Wally Orrel had just stopped in for some business supplies at the Brunswick hardware store last Thursday when an employee gave him a big hug and declared, "I just love that I'm doing here." What she was doing was working on a computer, a skill she learned thanks to the STAR Foundation, a non-profit founded by Orrel and his sister-in-law, Ellen Murphy.

The young lady was a graduate of the STAR Foundation's 10-week employment training program, offered free to qualified low-income students. The training program teaches the computer and job skills that help students improve their employment opportunities and acquire higher earning potential. It's a demanding program for



Mike Williams putting star on board

people who are either unemployed or in dead-end jobs, but for the 97 percent of them who stick it out, the rewards are great. Orrel says his statistics show that only 31 percent of the students are employed at the start of the program; one year later, 83 percent are employed.

During the 10-week program, students attend class four mornings a week and must complete four additional hours in the lab practicing what they've learned. Half the course of instruction deals with developing or improving computer skills. The other half deals with the life and business skills needed to get and keep a job.

At about week five, students begin volunteer work each afternoon for local non-profit businesses, preferably in an office setting. They do such things as type, file, and answer telephones. "We want them to be not just employees, but good employees," Orrel says. So he tells them, "Every time you go out there and do a good job, people notice and want to help you." Orrel helps students understand that when they begin their job searches, their volunteer mentors/bosses are potential references.

To keep students motivated, Orrel and Murphy have created rewards they call "Star Bucks." If you come to class, you get five Star Bucks. If you're on time, you get and additional three. Bring your materials with you, dress professionally, do your homework, do extra lab work, and you'll earn even more. Each Thursday all your Star Bucks for the week are deposited in your "bank account". Maintain perfect attendance for the 10 weeks and you'll get 100 bonus Star Bucks. Now, here's the payoff: The STAR Foundation hands out as many recycled computers as it can at the end of each program—perhaps one or two, perhaps one for each student in the class. The student with the most Star Bucks gets the best (or only) computer.

A recent innovation is the Working STAR Alumni bulletin board, where graduates like Mike Williams (in photo) post their star once they've landed their first post-training job. If a class is in session when they stop by, the students take a break and give the new worker a congratulatory round of applause—a real morale booster for everyone.

Since 1996, the STAR Foundation has graduated 635 students who were unemployed or underemployed—working but lacking the skills to earn above minimum wage. The program has reached at-risk youth, displaced workers, and people who are over 50 years old. In the beginning, Orrel and Murphy couldn't find enough students to fill their classes, so they began walking door to door throughout Brunswick's government housing, explaining the opportunities offered by their foundation. Now the foundation recruits students through churches, other non-profits, the state Department of Labor, and the Department of Children's and Family Services. For the current class, 40 students applied for just 12 slots.