

Coasting

By Liz Irwin

It was not a good morning, but I didn't know that until I sat down with my Cheerios, coffee, and the newspaper. Imagine my shock, as I imagine yours, to discover that our households, yours and mine, each, is over \$450,000 in debt. That doesn't count our mortgages, our credit card bills, any outstanding loans or charge accounts. It is the debt that our government has run up in our names, without our knowledge, nor our approval.

It is a comfort to know there are still good things in this world, good people, good programs. Partnership Scholars is one of those. If ever there was a time when it is important to encourage young people to become good citizens, good people, educated thinkers, leaders, for the years ahead, this is it. All our troubles will not disappear in a day or a year, even in a presidential term. We need young people who might otherwise have been lost because their opportunities were so limited they could not live up to their possibilities.

Partnership Scholars saves many of these young people, widens their horizons, encourages their aspirations, guides and mentors them so they see success in this society as a possibility, college as a given, leadership as a responsibility. The program is available in 19 schools — but the great thing is that it is available right here to a few chosen young people who have ability, but face what might well be impossible barriers to their getting and giving the most in this life. Young people with promise, but without opportunity, are given a volunteer mentor, and there are funds available for that mentor to use to provide the student with a chance to see new places, to become acquainted with theater and music, museums, government, college campuses, to have access to books, a computer, tools that will enrich their lives, and enhance their studies. The mentor is friend, companion, advisor, encourager, a person who is there to support and answer questions.

Starting whenever possible with seventh grade students, this relationship sees them through high school and into college. Its success rate is astounding. Youngsters who might well have been lost to poverty and failure emerge not just as successful students, but as motivated people.

The program is the brainchild of Marianne and Glen Langer who now live right here on the coast. They dig for funds, shepherd mentors, coordinate all the sites and keep the program alive and growing, always on the lookout for the money, the people, the schools, and the kids that make the program possible and successful. They are always on the lookout for people who like kids and would appreciate the opportunity to be mentors.

Space doesn't allow for a lot of detail, but imagine this, as of June 2008, 139 students graduated high school, and 92 percent of those are in or have graduated from college, kids who might not have had a chance. Not only the graduates, their parents, and the Langers are happy. You should hear the mentors. Rachel Binah says it has been the most satisfying experience in her life — she is working with her fourth student. Together they have traveled, even to China, investigated other cultures through theater, even food, visited the nation's capitol and Rachel has become a part of their community and their families.

I read the letters of students describing their experiences, and expressing their gratitude for the opportunities. I read other mentors' reports detailing the growth of their students, and describing their own pleasure in the relationship and the kids' successes. There are successful young people, because there are generous, caring, open-minded, willing, adults. I wish I had space for more. But I know, we are rich. That \$450,000 debt is money — we are talking about people, children and grown-ups, a fortune.

Writing this has made my day.