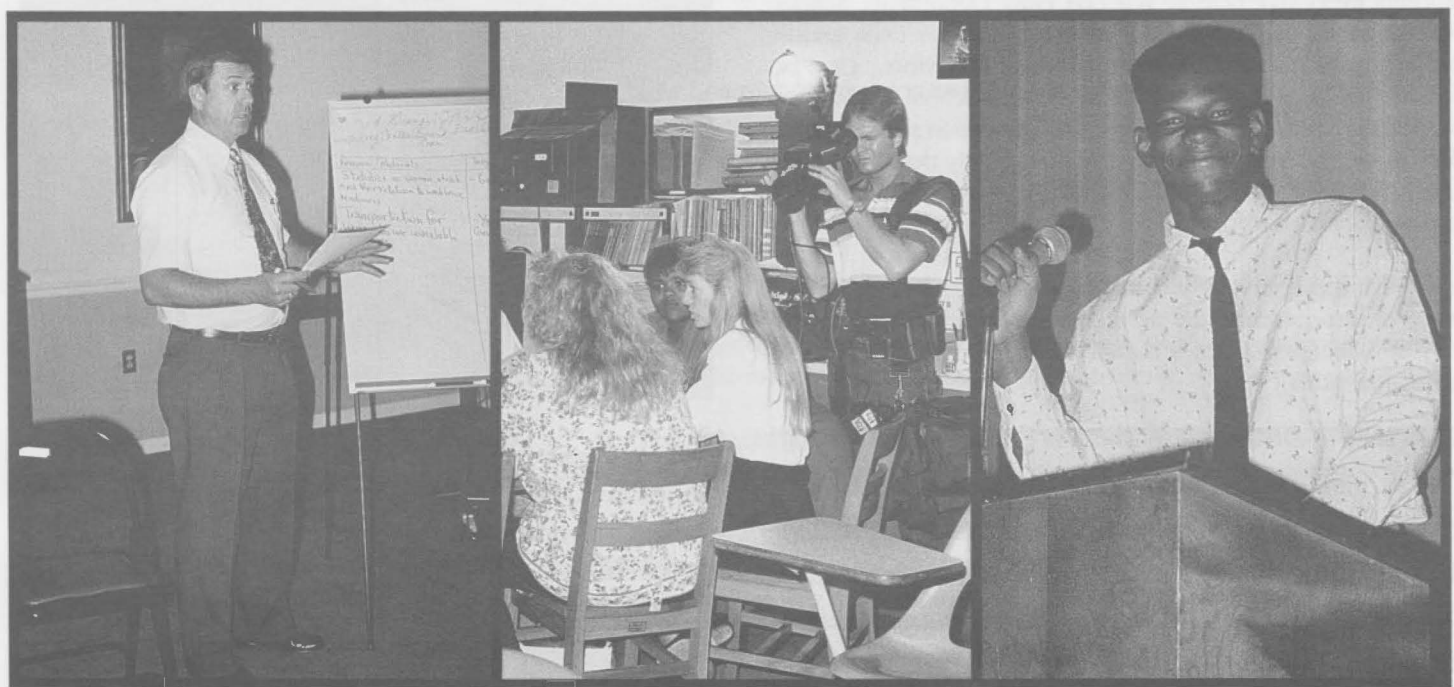


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# THE SPOTLIGHT

PUBLISHED BY THE RESEARCH & TRAINING CENTER OF THE WIL LOU GRAY OPPORTUNITY SCHOOL - ISSUE # 11, WINTER/SPRING 1992



## BUILDING BRIDGES FOR AT RISK TEENS

The Wil Lou Gray Opportunity School is continuing to emphasize the importance of collaboration. This past fall, the Center sponsored two statewide workshops focusing on building community ties and focusing on ways agencies and organizations can coordinate services and share resources. The Young Women At Risk Conference co-sponsored by the Division of Education, Office of the Governor, South Carolina Commission on Women and the State Department of Education attracted over 250 participants from 50 agencies and organizations.

The conference was designed to highlight programs that are meeting the special needs of children and young girls in the school and community. Information col-

lected at the conference is being used to design fall seminars for both administrative planners and/or support personnel including teachers, counselors, administrators, parents and volunteers. Teams of multi-agency instructors will provide intense one to three day training sessions to be coordinated by the WLGOS Research & Training Center.

The second conference brought together representatives from non-profit agencies to discuss the "Turning Points" initiative. The Turning Points project, sponsored by the Education Improvement Act Select Committee, is an effort to assess our middle school curriculum and the effectiveness of our social and community services that affect middle school children.

The project focused on a number of areas from improved curriculum to connecting schools with community services. The November conference, hosted by the Wil Lou Gray Opportunity School Research and Training Center was part of the overall statewide effort to survey hundreds of school and agency representatives. The survey concentrated on South Carolina's current practices and commitment to adopt new and improved methods of teaching and serving young adolescents.

We are proud to have been part of these conferences that represented over 200 agencies or organizations working together to address the needs of our most important resource - our children!

# Wil Lou Gray Opportunity School - Beating The Odds

By Jane F. Zenger

Dr. Joanne Fraser was interviewed recently by South Carolina Public Radio concerning the shocking statistics revealed in the 1991 At Risk Survey. These statistics, however, are no surprise to the teachers, counselors, and school nurses who work with at risk students every day here at Wil Lou Gray Opportunity School. Residential and group home children exhibit an even greater percentage of high risk characteristics and behaviors. Dr. Pete Johnson, of the University of South Carolina School of Medicine studied the South Carolina group home population and found that 51% of the children had someone in their family that had been in jail, 72% reported heavy drinking among family members and 64% had recently used alcohol.

What these surveys and studies don't say, however, is how many of these students are overcoming tremendous obstacles to stay in school, avoid drugs and alcohol and develop marketable vocational skills.



Off campus retreats, such as this one at Paris Mountain, use peer intervention strategies to help students overcome behavioral or drug/alcohol related problems.

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*"We define ourselves as an alternative school, and with that charge comes an attitude that must address more than the academic progress of our students. We are different and we don't apologize. We know the statistics. We also know that with the right combination of program and perspective, we can beat the odds."*

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Wil Lou Gray Opportunity School students enjoy growing bedding plants as a way to help finance special off-campus outings.

Dr. Raymond Morley, in his report on alternative education, emphasizes that alternative education is more of a "perspective" than a program. Here at Wil Lou Gray Opportunity School, we hope to foster that correct perspective by looking realistically at the academic goals and the emotional needs of the at risk student. We don't want to focus on the negative statistics that might lower our expectations, but instead we choose to examine strategies that might improve student confidence and provide positive role models and teach a healthy lifestyle. The article in this issue outlining "Ten Way We're Different" reflects our overall philosophy of treating the whole person, not just the student in the classroom.

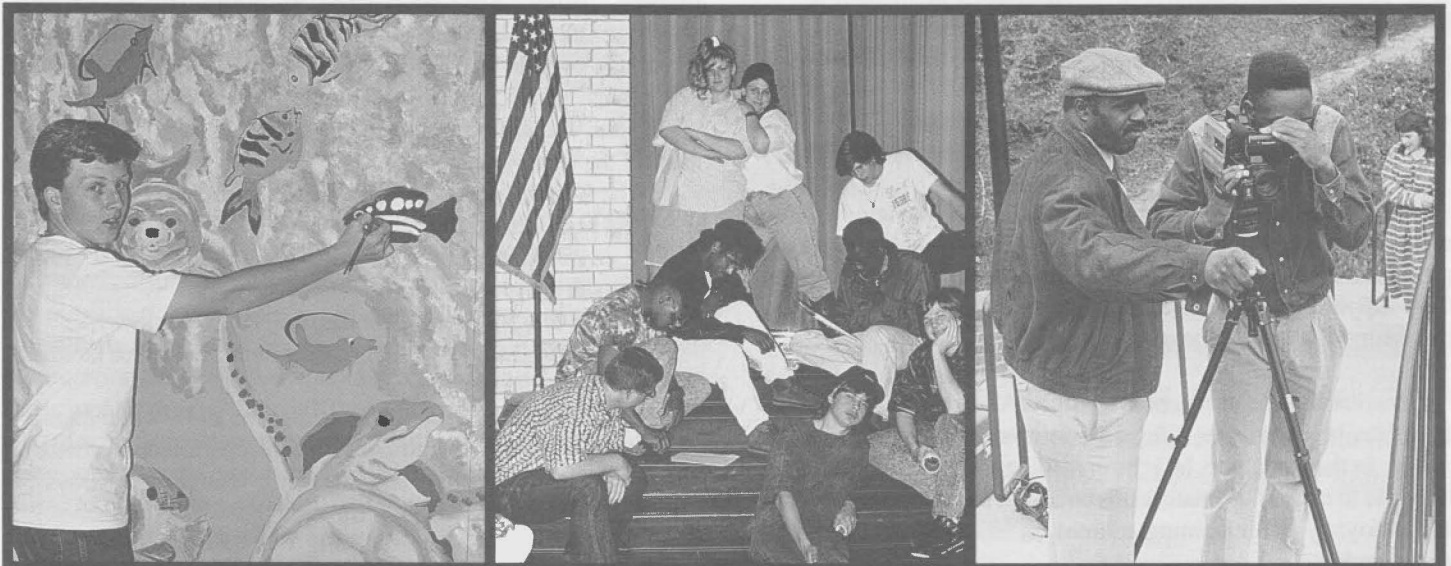
We define ourselves as an alternative school, and with that charge comes an attitude that must address more than the academic progress of our students. We are different and we don't apologize. We know the statistics. We also know that with the right combination of program and perspective, we can beat the odds. After all, we graduated over forty students last June. Students that just needed another perspective, another chance.

*\* Jane Zenger is the Director of the Wil Lou Gray Opportunity School Research & Training Center.*

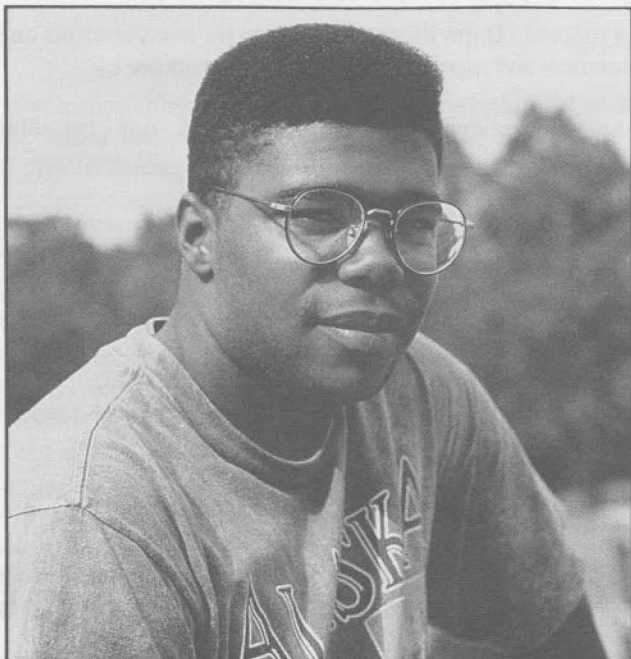
# Alternative Strategies That Work

1. **DORMS:** We believe that some students need to be out of the home to succeed. Dorm life is the first step for many students on the road to independence. For others, it provides a safe, predictable environment and supervision by responsible adults.
2. **SELECTION OF ACADEMIC PROGRAMS:** We offer a choice of (a) diploma program, (b) a vocational certification in one of five areas, or (c) GED preparation classes.
3. **CASE MANAGEMENT:** Every student is assigned a team of three to five adults. Each team includes a teacher, a youth counselor and a psychologist or social worker. Parents, mentors, a school nurse practitioner or a vocational counselor may also be included.
4. **ON SITE DRUG/ALCOHOL COUNSELORS:** We have a part-time prevention and a full-time intervention counselor working directly with the students on a daily basis.
5. **PHASE SYSTEM:** Students earn their privileges by earning points. Points are earned through projects above and beyond the basic requirements of the school.
6. **PEER COUNSELORS:** Students who show leadership ability receive training and work with special programs to help other students.
7. **SOCIAL SKILLS BUILDING CLASSES:** We sponsor at least ten different components including "ROPES", outdoor adventure classes, a young women's career club, men's issues classes, and many programs, pageants and clubs designed to improve self-image.
8. **THE RESEARCH AND TRAINING CENTER:** The Center is charged with disseminating information about at risk programs and strategies both in-house and across the state. Grants, university practicum programs, staff development, special courses and grant related projects flow through this department.
9. **CORE:** The Core Committee is a representative body of teachers, guidance counselors and dorm counselors that are working together to restructure the curriculum to meet the needs of the students. Not only the staff but the students have a voice in the process as well.
10. **CLUSTERS:** Cluster classes are team taught, inter-disciplinary classes that combine either content classes (such as science and history) with language arts. Art projects and cooperative learning activities are used in this innovative approach.
11. **CHILD DEVELOPMENT:** We provide an on-site Head Start program for children of our day students and for the community. The Child Care Center serves as a laboratory class for the child care vocational program.

*These strategies reflect some of the ways Wil Lou Gray Opportunity School meets the special needs of at risk students.*



## Highlights From Student Affairs



### Wil Lou Gray Student Wins Statewide Honor

By Johnny Bartley

Michael Dowling, a senior at Wil Lou Gray Opportunity School was selected as South Carolina Youth Ambassador for 1991-92 in a program sponsored by the Governor's Office. Michael submitted the winning essay in a contest open to students throughout the state. The theme of the contest was "Programs That Work."

For his accomplishment, Michael was awarded a four-day trip to Washington, D. C. to participate in a series of activities and appearances sponsored by the National Children's Day Foundation. He was able to meet with all of the state representatives from around the county. Among the sites on Michael's agenda were the White House, Air and Space Museum, Union Station, Capital Hill and a visit to the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts where the ambassadors were entertained by none other than Diana Ross.

Michael's essay focused on his desire to complete his high school education and the problems in his life that could have prevented that from happening. He said that coming to Wil Lou Gray Opportunity School helped him to overcome the adversity that many of today's teenagers face.

Michael has been accepted to attend Anderson College in the fall where he will pursue a degree in journalism while minoring in music. In the meantime, he is busy reading responses to the letters he wrote to each of the state representatives he met in Washington and enjoying his remaining months as South Carolina Youth Ambassador.

The Student Affairs Department has been busy since the beginning of school with a variety of programs and activities for students and staff. Many of the programs are coordinated with other departments at school. Among the highlights are:

**Adopt-a-Highway** - Sponsored by Mary Daniels, Weekend Coordinator. This program involves students cleaning up a stretch of Boston Avenue adopted by Wil Lou Gray Opportunity School.

**JTPA Remediation Program** - Coordinated jointly by Vocational Rehabilitation and Student Affairs, this program has certified ten students for evening classes on campus. These classes are designed to help students improve math, reading and language skills. Students are compensated with a stipend for attendance and levels of improvement.

**Project Merry Christmas** - Team Leaders and Peer Counselors worked together in raising awareness of those less fortunate during the holiday season. Each dorm prepared a castle made from donated canned goods. The winning dorm received a plaque and the canned goods were donated to the Harvest Hope Food Bank.

**Talent Show** - Coordinated by Milton Montgomery, Case Manager for E Dorm, this variety program showcased the talents of students all over the campus. Trophies were awarded to the winners.

**Mr. and Miss Wil Lou Gray** - A touching, original poem by Keith Sandifer and a convincing dramatic interpretation by Connie Kidd won them the titles of Mr. and Miss Wil Lou Gray 1991-92, respectively. They were the victors over a field of sixteen contestants in the annual pageant.

**Pioneer Outdoor Education Program** - This new and exciting aspect of Student Affairs is coordinated by Tammy Gordon, who is assisted by Darryl Mickens. The program offers a variety of adventures, not only to the students of Wil Lou Gray Opportunity School, but to outside agencies, schools and business corporations. Among the features are:

- \*The Ropes Course - An on-site facility which includes low and high elements of challenge.
- \*Camping and white water rafting on the Natahala River in Bryson City, North Carolina.
- \*Hiking and sightseeing on the Blue Ridge Parkway.
- \*For the avid anglers, trout fishing in the Cherokee streams.

**Staff Follies** - This hilarious and sidesplitting show was the staff's Christmas gift to the student body. Each department presented a skit with a holiday theme ranging from "The Twelve Days of Christmas" to "The Nutcracker Suite."

# "Confident Girls Need Women Heroes"

By Susan Davis



## Highlights From The Keynote Address

What is the extent of the problem of female dropouts in South Carolina? Let's begin with the numbers. According to the Office of Research at the State Department of Education for the year 1989/90 (this is most current data available), there were 2,447 female drop-outs representing 2.9% of the total female enrollment. Minority and non-minority girls drop out in equal numbers. For males the figure is 3.8% of total enrollment or 3,321 students. However, after they drop out of school, girls are less likely than boys to return to school or obtain a general equivalency diploma once they have dropped out. **Nationally, it is estimated that well over two million American girls and women between the ages of 14 and 24 are high school dropouts.**

Approximately 40% of the females who drop out of school do so during a pregnancy; the other 60% who drop out do so because of reasons other than pregnancy or parenting. (Although these girls do not drop out because of pregnancy, it has been determined that these girls are three times more likely to get pregnant than their counterpart who stays in school. 50% of teenage pregnancies occur to school dropouts.) Some of the other reasons cited for dropping out of school are "poor grades" or simply "school was not for me." Until recently, little research had been devoted to the evolution of these attitudes and problems. This current evidence suggests that some aspects of schooling harm girls' self-esteem and independence resulting in lowered academic and economic success.

The consequences of female dropouts is not only felt by the young women and their families, it is felt by the business community, and the citizens of this state. Two out of every three new workers by the year 2000 will be women, but currently, women have the lowest level of workforce participation. With the projected labor shortage, businesses must be concerned with the educational level and career choices of young women. As far as the impact on citizens - high rates of motherhood and welfare assistance is a characteristic of female dropouts. You know the old adage . . . Educate a man and you educate one person, educate a woman and you educate a family. Data also shows the two generation connection. 61% of dropouts were in a household with low family income and where the head of household was also a dropout.

There are five factors that have been identified as most likely to keep young women in school. (1) Academic encouragement, (2) Activities to enhance self-esteem, (3) Bias-free interactions with teachers and administrators, (4) Encouragement to consider or enroll in nontraditional career courses such as math and science and (5) Coordination of services for academic and nonacademic needs (such as flexible school schedules, job training, childcare for pregnant and parenting teens).

You will note that four of the five factors needed to address young women at risk for school failure are directly related to the studies on self-esteem. However, if we expect our school system to respond to this need, we must give them the training and resources to "identify and correct those attitudes and practices that unfairly penalize their female students." If we want these young women to "be all they can be" we have got to change our systems.

Recently at a conference I attended, the speaker said, "implementing change takes an immense, not just some, but an immense amount of time, patience and commitment." I hope you leave today ready to meet the challenge and give immense amounts of time, patience and commitment to the daughters of South Carolina. **Confident girls need women heroes. Confident girls need you.**

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*'You know the old adage ... Educate a man and you educate one person, educate a woman and you educate a family. Data also shows the two generation connection. 61% of dropouts were in a household with low-family income and where the head of household was also a dropout.'*

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# Reflections

## An Ethnographic Study of the Acquisition of Socialization Skills With At-Risk Adolescents

By: Kathleen House Robbins, Ph. D.

This abstract is the result of an ethnographic study which was conducted with a group of students at Wil Lou Gray Opportunity School. The purpose of this study was to examine the process of the acquisition of social skills with at-risk adolescents. The questions driving this study focused on the impact of an educational experience on Etiquette. In particular, this study addresses the way in which at-risk adolescents are given the opportunity for the acquisition of new social skills through an educational experience.

It was hypothesized that a structured educational experience in socialization skills may provide these individuals with an opportunity to acquire new skills. One area which can be considered within the socialization process is the acquisition of the more formal rules of etiquette. Etiquette is a formal and often complex process which covers eating habits, social interactions, celebrations, and written correspondence, to name a few.

The at-risk adolescent may be in need of a variety of assistance and interventions due to such issues as an inability to succeed in a traditional academic setting, truancy, delinquency, disruption of the home environment, and substance abuse and a host of others. The factor of social inadequacy can pervade and complicate problems in all of these areas.

The at-risk adolescent may have been denied access to some of the developmental social experiences that the general population takes for granted, such as eating in finer restaurants and knowledge of the basic rules of etiquette for conducting oneself in a variety of social settings. Without access to these socialization experiences, the at-risk adolescent can feel invisible barriers from a multitude of cultural experiences, and can subsequently maintain a limited range of options. This may be maintained throughout their adult life and present deficits in social functioning may inhibit their future potential, abilities, and successes. The ironic tragedy is that these invisible barriers may in turn be transmitted unwittingly to their own children through unconscious modeling, and the cycle continues.

### The Study

The group of students to be studied voluntarily enrolled in a short-term class of Etiquette. The content of the class included a "potpourri" of basic etiquette and manners, role-play of the material covered, minimal job seeking skills, and open discussion of topics which interested the participants. The grand finale was the last

session when the class, consisting of four girls and three boys, the instructor and I, went in the school van to Al's Upstairs in Columbia.

On the way to the restaurant, the students appeared somewhat anxious and excited. They again asked which fork they used for what (salad fork, etc.) and reviewed some other basic rules of dining etiquette. They talked excitedly among themselves as they anticipated what the restaurant would be like.

The evening turned out to be an enjoyable experience. The students seemed to have a great time. At one point during the meal, a group at an adjoining table became quite loud, laughing and somewhat disruptive. The students turned to me and proclaimed, "That's not good etiquette!"

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*"The at-risk adolescent may have been denied access to some of the developmental social experiences that the general population takes for granted, such as eating in finer restaurants and knowledge of the basic rules of etiquette for conducting oneself in a variety of social settings."*

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### Results Of The Study

The original hypothesis driving the study concerned the impact of an educational experience upon the acquisition of new social skills with at-risk students. After the dining experience, a questionnaire was completed by six of the students in order to rate their learning experience. The results of the questionnaire and of the student's comments supports the finding that the students believed they benefited from the class. When rating their learning on a scale from one to three, with one representing learned a lot, two was learned a little, and three was did not learn anything new, the majority, five out of six, of the students responded that they learned a lot, one student responded s/he learned a little, no one responded that they did not learn anything new.

### Applications

Providing at-risk adolescents with the opportunity to acquire the social skills needed to function in mainstream society may provide them with a life-time of benefits. Educational experiences, which on the surface appear to be trite or unimportant, may serve as vehicles to tear down the invisible walls which socially isolate individuals, and may also serve to equip them with the tools to function in a new social sphere.

# Integrating The Arts Into The Curriculum

By Jane Zenger

Imagine students dancing in African masks, making music videos about drug and alcohol abuse, shaping Cawtaba Indian style pottery and acting and singing in an original play. All this and more is happening in the arts this year at Wil Lou Gray Opportunity School. The students are part of an innovative arts across the curriculum project bringing the arts into content classes. In History class, students construct pyramids as they study ancient Egypt. Science students research tropical fish at Riverbanks Zoo and paint their fish on a mural for the school.

These and other activities are the focus of a documentary video being made here at the Opportunity School showing how the arts can be used to motivate at risk students. The video is part of an Arts in Education project to provide an expanded arts curriculum through interdisciplinary classes. The South Carolina Arts Commission and the University of South Carolina are providing equipment and technical assistance and South Carolina ETV has expressed an interest in airing the program next fall.

The video will document seven types of artists and a number of Wil Lou Gray Opportunity School student projects associated with the innovative "cluster" classes. Cluster class teachers being interviewed for the video will explain team teaching strategies, cooperative learning activities and ways to integrate lesson plans. The overall goal is to foster a non-threatening environment that motivates the undermotivated and stimulates creativity in students with learning problems and poor communication skills.

The video will explore how integrating the arts into the curriculum not only motivates the student but helps teach those critical thinking skills involved in problem solving and decision making.



**A Wil Lou Gray Opportunity School student poses with African masks made in the social studies cluster class.**



**Teachers, Carole Goodson, Mary Flynn and Fiber Artist, Jennifer Amor display a student made quilt showing scenes from ancient history.**



**David Harvin, Director for the South Carolina Children's Alliance and Senator Nell Smith were featured speakers at the Wil Lou Gray Opportunity School's South Carolina Young Women At Risk Conference**

*The R & T SPOTLIGHT is a quarterly publication of  
WLGOS Research & Training Center.*

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*Due to budgetary constraints, the winter and spring 1992  
issues of the R & T Spotlight have been merged.*

## **THE SPOTLIGHT**

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Research & Training Center  
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