

Discovering their world — Coalfield students overcome challenges through program
by JENNIFER McDANIELS

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Photos submitted by JENNIFER McDANIELS/Kentucky Coal Academy Scholars had the opportunity last week to learn about the history and the future of the coal industry through lectures, workshops and educational tours.

An orange was tossed around by students in grades 7-9 at the beginning of this summer's Southeast Scholars Camp. If a student caught it, they had to relate something they knew about coal mining.

Surprisingly, not much was shared.

By the time the week-long learning as well as recreational special program for the young Scholars was over, the students knew plenty about coal and were eager to share their knowledge.

"It's been very insightful," said Southeast Scholars participant Breanna Lawson. "I've learned a lot of new facts. Plus, it was awesome meeting Stella Parton!"

All the coal-related information the Scholars learned was made real to them near the end of their summer camp last week when they visited the Pine Branch strip mine site, stood on a four-foot bituminous slab, and met country music singer and pro-coal activist Stella Parton, a sister to the legendary Dolly Parton. With the roar of big machinery echoing in the distance, Parton talked to the Scholars about the importance of coal in the Appalachian hills, then thrilled them all by singing about its worth.

"It was moving," said Southeast Scholars Assistant Coordinator Shandea Fields. "If the students didn't have any idea about the importance of coal before, they definitely do now. Stella, who's got a new CD out called 'American Coal,' talked positively about people in the mountains, too, whom I believed strongly impacted these kids. She told them that 'Appalachian people possessed pride, power and passion.'"

Those are qualities that leaders of the Southeast Scholars program strive to instill within their participants. If not through coal, then through a variety of subjects, activities, and learning ventures organized by the 14-year-old Southeast Community and Technical [College program](#) designed to educate and empower socioeconomic-challenged students. Paul Pratt, who has played a major role in the development of SKCTCS' Southeast Scholars program and continues to serve on its steering committee, said his

involvement with the outreach had been “one of the highlights of his career.”

“The program’s mission is to provide greater access of higher learning among underserved populations,” Pratt said. “Southeast Scholars was implemented as part of the Rural Community College Initiative. Since the beginning, we have witnessed the transformation of many youth from low performers with low self-esteem to highly confident college graduates who are now in the workforce.”

Through school visits and referrals, “at-risk” and “first generation college students” are identified by program leaders with help from educators in Harlan, Letcher, and Bell counties. Scholars are identified in the sixth grade, and enrichment activity involvement, such as summer camps, begin in the seventh grade. Upon completion of high school as well as the Southeast Scholars program, participants become eligible for guaranteed college [tuition](#) for an [associate degree](#) at SKCTCS.

The enrichment and intervention programming provided through the Southeast Scholars program assists students in the successful progression of academic and life skills that will help them to move “seamlessly forward” through college and then the workforce. Also while participating in the program, students are offered the opportunity to receive paid work experience through local businesses.

Sandra Brown, who serves as the Southeast Scholars director, said her passion for her work stems from the fact that she is a first generation college graduate.

“And I believe graduating from college will change one’s life and provide a brighter tomorrow,” Brown said. “It is with this thought in mind that I come to work each day with the desire to provide academic opportunities for our students, which assist them in realizing their dreams, hopes and most importantly, to achieve to their highest potential. If we can work together to change the mindset of our students into thinking they can achieve their goals and make them a reality, then we have accomplished our mission.”

Fields, Brown’s assistant, said it was an encouragement to her to see students, who have in the past “fallen through the cracks,” discover their talents and to break the cycle of Appalachian fatalism.

“Many of our students have faced some hard stumbling blocks and hurdles, but they are overcomers and will continue to push forward,” Fields said. “They are a true encouragement to me, and I could go on and on lifting them up because I’m so proud of them. I feel so very honored to be a part of the Southeast Scholars team, because this program is truly changing lives.”

While several topics have been explored and learning adventures experienced since the inception of the Southeast Scholars program, this year’s summer camp theme was “Survivor Coal” (Creating Opportunities and Academic Leadership). Fields said the theme was chosen because of the prevalence of the coal industry in the media today with accidents, proposed legislation and increased controversy concerning environmental issues. Although the Scholars are children of the coal fields, it was evident through the toss of an orange at the beginning of summer camp that they knew little of their coal heritage and even less of coal production’s future. But with local officials in the coal industry like Massey Energy’s Ross Kegan and the Kentucky Coal Academy’s Dr. Bill Higginbotham as guest speakers, the Scholars were presented a broad spectrum of coal-related knowledge, including its history, its technological evolution, the different types of coal mining, engineering aspects, as well as the education and skills needed to be career-advancing miners.

Higginbotham, who works as the executive director of the Kentucky Coal Academy, said he was “anxious

to talk a little coal with the kids.” It’s part of his mission with the Kentucky Coal Academy to attract youth to the coal mining industry and to help rebuild the state’s aging coal miner population.

“I get excited anytime I am given the platform to talk about coal,” Higginbotham said. “But I was even more enthused to talk about it with the Southeast Scholars. I was anxious to let them know how the industry has evolved through the years, and that it takes a good education and specialty-trained skills to advance in the industry. These kids deserve very successful futures, and the coal industry can offer them not only rewarding careers, but the opportunity to make very good money while living at home in eastern Kentucky.

In the program’s effort to offer a complete picture of the current issues concerning coal, not everything that was discussed was positive. Black lung, rock dust, mountain top removal, proper settlement and other environmental issues also surfaced. But it was through the discussions, Fields pointed out, that the Scholars probed for their own truths, asked their own questions and came to their own conclusions.

“And that’s part of the empowerment that we strive to help the students develop,” Fields said. “Whether we’re talking about coal or not.”

Harlan County Judge-Executive Joe Grieshop was also a “Survivor Coal” camp special speaker. He told the students how coal impacted everyday life through the building of new schools and the extension of water lines through coal severance funding.

“I thank the coal miner every day,” Grieshop said. “Because it is their work that brings a better quality of life for you and me.”

Part of the recent Southeast Scholars “Survivor Coal Camp” also included a visit to the Kentucky Coal Academy’s training facility in Cumberland, which included “hands on” time for the students with the academy’s state-of-the-art mining simulators. Tours of the Kentucky Coal Museum and the Portal 31 Mine Exhibition were also given. While the Scholars had a busy agenda of lectures, workshops and educational tours, they also had plenty of fun with recreational outings to Buckhorn State Resort Park near Hazard and the Challenger Learning Center. Most agreed, however, the highlight of their trip was meeting Stella Parton atop the Pine Branch strip mine site and listening to her sing.

Fields said some of the Scholars had never traveled out of their home county before. One of the greatest attributes of the Southeast Scholars program is the opportunity it offers for children of the coal fields to experience several “firsts.” Some had their first out-of-county trip, some had their first boat ride at Buckhorn Lake, and some met their first country music star.

Alex Haywood summed up his Southeast Scholars “Survivor Coal” experience by simply stating “It was amazing.”

Southeast Scholars will be conducting their “Survivor Coal” camp for the program’s 10 through 12th grade students next week. For more information about Southeast Scholars, contact Brown at 589-2145.

Read more: [The Harlan Daily Enterprise - Discovering their world — Coalfield students overcome challenges through program](#)