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Coal Creek Scholars

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More than a dozen former Briceville Elementary School students returned to their former classrooms during the 12th Annual Coal Creek Watershed Foundation Scholars Day to deliver a profound message to the school's current fourth- and fifth-grade students: "Take advantage of the educational opportunities provided to you and never forget where you came from."

Coal Creek Watershed Foundation President Barry Thacker says that Coal Creek Scholars Day is always his favorite day of the year.

"This is what it's all about," said Thacker. "It's a big part of why we do this."

The Coal Creek Scholars Program was established in 2002 by the Coal Creek Watershed Foundation (CCWF) to give graduates of Briceville Elementary School assistance in attaining a college education.

A 1990 census showed that just 17-percent of adults in Briceville graduated high school compared to 66-per-

'Never forget where you came from ...' but go as far as an education will take you

cent from the rest of Tennessee. The same census showed that 0.5-percent of adults in Briceville graduated college compared to 16-percent from the rest of Tennessee.

Thacker is on a personal mission to help reverse that disturbing trend by making sure all the children of Briceville are afforded every educational opportunity to reach their goals.

A Knoxville-based engineer, Thacker and assistant Carol Moore have spent the last decade working to promote the significant history of the region — Briceville is the site of one of the worst mining disasters in American history, the 1902 Fraterville Mine explosion - and to preserve the area's natural resources, including Coal

Creek itself. Thacker says that it's his group's efforts to enhance educational opportunities for the children of Briceville - some of which are decedents of the miners who perished in the 1902 blast - through events like Scholars Day that has become the nucleus of all that they do.

The Coal Creek Scholars Program helps Briceville students through scholarships and guidance in preparing college/technical school admissions and applications for other scholarships.

The high school seniors who receive assistance through the CCWF are asked to serve as mentors to current Briceville Elementary students



A former Briceville Elementary School student talks to current BES fourth- and fifth-graders about how the Coal Creek Watershed Foundation Scholarship has benefited her through the years during the Thursday, Dec. 19, 12th Annual Coal Creek Watershed Foundation Scholars Day. More than a dozen former BES students took turns talking to current BES students, encouraging them to take pride in where they come from and to take advantage of all the opportunities afforded to them through the Coal Creek Watershed Foundation. — Chris Silcox

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Never

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in the Scholars Program. As of 2012, the program had helped a total of 32 former BES students attend college.

Thacker says the goal is to bring the high school students back to share their educational experiences with the younger students, and to hopefully inspire the younger group to follow in their footsteps.

Every year on Scholars Day several of the former BES students who have benefited from the Coal Creek Watershed Foundation Scholarships return to the school to offer personal testimonies of how far an education will take you if you work at it. The former students provided the elementary students insight such as what life is like on a college campus and the importance choosing a career that truly makes you happy. One former BES student - Briceville native and 2010 ACHS graduate Kyle Leinart - shared his experiences studying in London, England for five-weeks recently through a University of Tennessee engineering program.

"That was such an incredible opportunity," said Leinart. "I can say that studying in London is something I never even expected I'd have a chance to do. I don't think any of it would have been possible without confidence and guidance I received from the teachers here at this school and the scholarship assistance (from the Coal Creek Watershed Foundation)."

The returning BES students are as diverse as they are appreciative.

"This is always our favorite day of the year," said Thacker. "It makes such a great impact on the elementary students seeing former students who just a few years ago were sitting in those same desks and walking those same halls but are now going to college and doing exciting things with their lives."

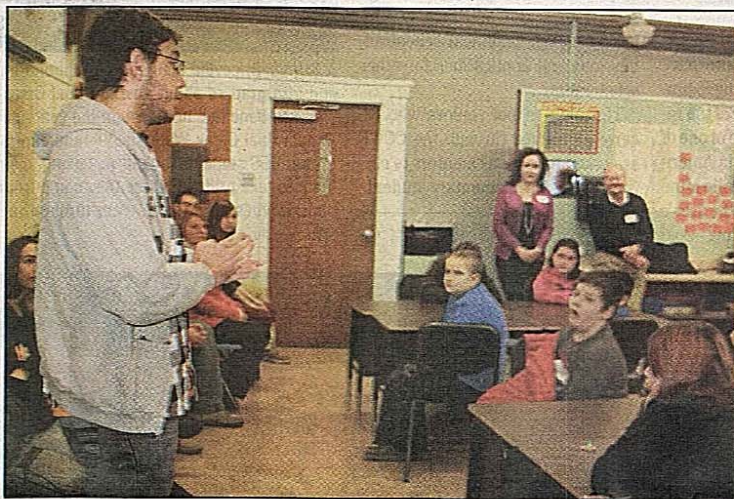
The former students understand how important it is for the current BES fourth- and fifth-graders to see examples of how success is attainable if you work at it.

"When I was here I never thought I'd have these opportunities," said Samantha Randolph, a former BES student who is using the Coal Creek Scholarships to attend college at Carson-Newman. "I encourage these guys to take advantage of these opportunities."

Ricky Bailey, a 2011 Coal Creek Watershed Scholarship recipient who is presently in college toward becoming a minister, provided a stirring



More than a dozen former Briceville Elementary School students pose for a group photo with the 34 current fourth- and fifth-grade students attending the school during the 12th Annual Briceville Watershed Foundation Scholars Day held on Thursday, Dec. 19. Coal Creek Watershed Foundation President Barry Thacker (pictured back row far right) and Watershed Foundation assistant Carol Moore (pictured fourth row far left) say the annual Scholars Day celebration is the biggest day of the year for them. "This is truly what it's all about for us," said Thacker. "It's why we do what we do." BES Principal Sandra Patton is pictured (back row second from right) standing next to Thacker.



Above: Former Briceville Elementary School student Kyle Leinart talks to the BES fourth- and fifth-grade students about the importance of staying in school and working toward college degrees. Leinart also told the students about his recent experience of studying at the University of London that he was able to do this year through the University of Tennessee Engineering Department. Below: More than a dozen former Briceville Elementary School students attended the 12th annual Scholars Day festivities on Thursday, Dec. 19, at the school. — Chris Silcox



Coal Creek Watershed Foundation assistant Carol Moore (left) and Watershed Foundation President Barry Thacker (right) address fourth- and fifth-grade Briceville Elementary School students. — Chris Silcox

message to the young students, urging them to take advantage of every opportunity and never forget where they came from.

"You guys have a unique opportunity in front of you because each of you are special and this is a unique school," said Bailey. "You guys are unique because you are from this school and this community. Being from this school and this community you guys have a lot of incredible opportunities that others don't have. Is there another Briceville Elementary School anywhere in the world? This is really a special place."

Bailey told the Briceville students that they are fortunate to be from such a small, close-knit community where everyone takes care of each other and share a common bond. He urged the students to always remember where they came from.

"I encourage you to be proud of where you are from," Bailey continued. "People from all over the world know about Briceville - they probably couldn't find it on a map but they know about it. You guys get an opportunity that will mold you into something greater because of the opportunity given to you here. We live in a special community composed of unique individuals, so always embrace who you are. Even if you become a citizen of the world, remember you're from Briceville."

Thacker noted that some of the other former BES students in attendance at the 2013 Scholars Day included future nurses, doctors, engineers, business leaders, and medical/computer/culinary specialists.