

In rural South Carolina (Lower Orangeburg/Upper Dorchester counties, or LO/UD)

On a motorist's map of South Carolina, Bowman is a speck just off roaring Interstate 95. To get there, you drive through fallow fields strung with collapsing farmhouses and barns. In the middle of town, once-stately houses sag on their foundations. It's quiet as a tomb except for the people coming and going at the convenience store on the corner.



Small towns in the Lower Orangeburg/Upper Dorchester region of South Carolina have been left behind in the new South economy.

Bowman, one of three main towns that make up this local Program for the Rural Carolinas site, is a town of 1,178 people, 69 percent of them African-American. Most working people hold down two jobs, making the minimum wage of \$5.15 or so per hour at fast-food joints or gas stations. On Wednesday nights, churchgoers gather at small fellowship halls, Bibles in hand, to study the Scriptures.

This is what sociologists call the "Black Belt," an 11-state swath of former slave and sharecropping territory that is home to some of the poorest people in the United States.

All of South Carolina has a stark divide between blacks and whites in most quality-of-life factors, from family income and

health to school dropout rates. But in the Black Belt, which in this state runs down Interstate 95, the gap has not narrowed since the Depression.

A few mainly white families still own the majority of the land. A large percentage of white students have fled to private schools. In the now-majority-black public schools, the dropout rate is 10 percent higher than the statewide average. Those with the means to leave the region, do, while the dropouts stay behind. Thousands of families have been poor for so many generations that "wealth"—as in a house of their own, or even a bank account—is a word they don't know.

Getting Started

When state Senator John Matthews, an African American and a Bowman native, heard about the PRC, he knew his electoral district contained exactly the kind of "left-behind" places the grant program was aiming to help. He quickly pulled together a team of local leaders and submitted a proposal for funding.



SC state Senator John Matthews has been the guiding force behind the Lower Orangeburg/Upper Dorchester PRC initiative.



Senator Matthews garnered state money for a new industrial park in his district.

As a legislator, Matthews had fought for years to pull his district out of poverty.

He helped Bowman's school district merge with a wealthier one and build an attractive new school for kindergarten through 12th grade. He garnered state money for a new industrial park that bears his name. He used his clout in the state Senate to create a commission to find ways to alleviate the persistent poverty of the Interstate 95 corridor.

"People aren't learning the skills they need to get decent jobs in today's economy," Matthews said. "That has created a stagnant attitude. Even though people want better things, they're not willing to make the sacrifices up front, or understand that connection. This state isn't going anywhere until this corridor is developed."

Matthews has deep roots in Bowman. He was born here on his parents' farm. His father was a Methodist pastor as well as a farmer – and he ran a barbershop, a soda shop and one of the two black theaters in the county. His mother was a schoolteacher. She earned far less than the white teachers did, Matthews recalled, and she had to let her students out to work in the fields for six months a year. "She used to teach her classes out of

old books stamped ‘For Colored Only,’” he said.

Both his parents had college degrees, and they made sure their six children earned theirs too. In turn, Matthews and his siblings sent all their children to college. But many of his cousins didn’t. His family is a living example of how a university degree creates a better future.

“That’s why I’m so passionate about education,” Matthews said.

“In this knowledge-based economy, if you’ve got an education, you’ve got a shot. If not, you’re out of the game.”

His PRC grant proposal targeted the poorest parts of lower Orangeburg County and of upper Dorchester County, next door to the east. Most of the people served would come from Bowman in Orangeburg County, and tiny St. George, 16 miles north, in Dorchester County. The area is rural, largely African American, and suffers much higher unemployment than each county as a whole.

Once Matthews’ team won the grant, they formalized the board of the local PRC. One key member was Dr. John Elliott, a respected black pastor and Bowman native who ministers to three local churches, including the oldest black church in the area.

Elliott leads the local Ministerial Alliance, and his Shady Grove United Methodist Church, whose graveyard holds headstones from slavery days, was chosen as the official recipient of funds for the LO/UD PRC.

“Dr. Elliott has been a stabilizing influence in St. George for a long time.” Matthews said.

Matthews also invited representatives from the two technical colleges—Trident Technical College in Charleston, 70 miles east of Bowman, and Orangeburg-Calhoun Technical College (O-C Tech), 18 miles west in Orangeburg. (Technical colleges in South Carolina are the equivalent of community colleges in North Carolina.)

Also at the table were representatives of both counties’ social services and adult education departments.

“We didn’t know each other,” Matthews said. “It was the first time in these two counties when we brought the service providers to one table, and said ‘What piece of this can you help us with?’”

Job Training

Every local PRC team starts with a blank page and the question: How can we create jobs? And not just any jobs, but stable jobs that pay well enough that families can cover their expenses, save some money, and eventually buy houses or college educations.

It soon became clear to the LO/UD PRC leaders that there was a strong demand for entry-level medical personnel from the thriving health-care industry.

Between Charleston and Summerville, 45 miles to the east, there are four hospitals, seven nursing homes, and a myriad of other clinics, home health agencies

and hospices. Even in Bowman and St. George, there was strong demand for health services because of the lack of doctors in the rural area.

The idea of starting a Certified Nurse Assistant (CNA) program in lower Orangeburg and upper Dorchester counties came from a speaker at a PRC “Learning Institute,” a periodic gathering of local PRC leaders arranged by MDC.

“We made the connection and said, ‘Let’s look at whether that would be useful where we are,’” said Kim Sturgeon, the PRC coordinator. Program leaders talked to the owner of the nursing home in St. George. They were told that the home constantly needed new CNAs because of the high turnover rate.

Both the technical college in Charleston and in Orangeburg already offered CNA programs. But for unemployed people around Bowman and St. George, the 45-minute drive meant the colleges might as well have been on the moon. Few owned cars for the commute, or could afford child care. They were unfamiliar with the cities and with the technical colleges in general. As one graduate put it, “If you don’t know what’s out there, it makes it much harder.”

PRC board member Jean Nisbet, Trident’s nurse training coordinator, addressed the problem by volunteering to bring instructors and equipment for the 100-hour course to St. George. But she needed a place to conduct classes, and to keep the hospital bed and mannequin that the students practice on.

Renee Rivers, another PRC board member who is the Program

Coordinator for the Dorchester County Adult Education Department in St. George, offered the use of her building.

The two women got the shabby interior of the blue cinderblock building cleaned from top to bottom, painted, and filled with furniture donated from Trident Tech.

“It was sitting down and saying, who could we bring to the table to take it a step further?” Rivers said.

They opened the course to applicants and posted flyers to attract potential students. PRC funds would cover nearly all the students’ expenses—tuition, books, the watches they used for timing patients’ vital signs, and the cost of the state CNA exam. The program also paid for uniforms and shoes and for a re-test if a student failed the state exam the first time.

Melissa’s Story

Melissa Gardner was sitting at the hairdresser’s when she spied the flyer posted there.

The 37-year-old divorced mother was living a life so hemmed in that her world seemed to end outside the front door. She and her two children lived with her mother. She had no job, and no car with which to look for a job.

Her only work experience was short stints at one temp agency after another, none longer than three months. She’d tried before to get a college degree, but money troubles had always blocked her path. “I didn’t have child care, and it was

so far away. So I’d start school and quit a semester, then go back.”

Gardner hurried to enroll in the six-week CNA course. Getting through it wasn’t easy. Many nights, her mother was unable to give her a ride, and she had to ask PRC board member Rev. Elliott or local coordinator Garon Jackson for a lift home.



Melissa Gardner (center), along with fellow classmates Angela Goodwin (top) and Sharon Manor, graduated from the Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) program in early 2004. Earning her CNA credential netted the formerly unemployed Gardner a job the day after graduation.

Still, the day after graduation—Two months after starting the course — she got a job at the nursing home in St. George at \$6 an hour. The pay rose to \$6.50 when she got her state CNA license. “It wasn’t much, but I didn’t have a car, so I couldn’t go anywhere else to look for work,” Gardner said. When she had saved up \$800, she bought an old car that barely made it between Dorchester and St. George.

Like most others in her class, Gardner soon moved on to better-paying jobs—first, an \$8.45 per hour CNA job at a Summerville nursing home, and today, work at an Alzheimer’s facility in Charleston that pays \$12.75 per hour.

“What makes this program so unique is that they can find opportunity in

Charleston and still live here,” said Jackson. “In Charleston they can’t live on \$12 an hour.”

Gardner credits the PRC for helping her change her life. “I’m more self-sufficient, and I can do things on my own,” she said. “It’s not like welfare, where you’re just waiting for a check every month.”

After her last job change, Gardner moved with her children out of her mother’s house into a rented mobile home. Likewise, seven of her fellow CNA students were able to move out of the St. George public housing complex after earning their state licenses.

Building Wealth

Melissa Gardner didn’t stop striving after becoming a CNA. She went through PRC’s Earned Income Tax Credit program, which helps low-income people claim tax credits, and used her tax refund to buy a dependable car: a blue 1998 Saturn with only 45,000 miles on the odometer.

Now Gardner is enrolled in a local Individual Development Account program, which helps people acquire assets such as homes, educational degrees, and businesses. She has saved more than \$700 toward a down payment on a house and is working to improve her credit rating. Once she reaches \$1000, the IDA program will match it with \$2000, giving her \$3000 to put down on a home of her own.

Preparing for Success

Early on, PRC leaders realized that many applicants for the CNA course were academically unprepared. So they started a prerequisite called the “Pre-CNA” class—27 hours of basic math and reading, study skills, on-the-job etiquette, and interviewing techniques. Like the CNA class, “Pre-CNA” is offered at the Adult Education building in St. George.

To enter the Pre-CNA course, applicants must score above a certain point on the Adult Basic Education test. If they don’t make the cutoff, it’s up to Jackson, the local PRC coordinator, to tell them—and, more importantly, to coax them into a refresher course for basic reading and math, also at the Adult Education center.

Jackson, whose friendly manner immediately puts people at ease, never tells applicants their test scores. He never uses the word “fail.” Instead, he tells them, “You were *this* close,” holding his thumb and forefinger just a hair apart. Then he encourages them to take the refresher course and try again.

“If you want to destroy somebody’s self-esteem, tell them they’re reading on a second-grade level,” Rivers said. “The word ‘test’ is scary, especially if you’ve been out of school a long time.”

For the PRC’s first Pre-CNA class, 25 people applied, but only seven got in. Half of the 18 others enrolled in adult education classes. Of those nine, eight scored high enough to join the class on the second try.

The careful screening and preparation of students who eventually earn their CNA degrees is the reason the program has such a high job placement rate, said Nisbet, the Trident Tech nurse training director.

As of the end of March 2006, 92 of the 98 people who had gone through the pre-CNA and CNA courses had found jobs.

Many started out at the small nursing home in St. George—which now hires CNAs exclusively from the PRC program—and soon moved on to better-paying jobs.

In addition, the PRC area’s second technical college, Orangeburg-Calhoun Technical College (O-C Tech), located 20 miles west of Bowman in Orangeburg, was to offer its own CNA course at a satellite campus. Three years into the program, it added the course to its new Lake Marion campus.

Another Step Up

Encouraged, PRC leaders started a second course for Patient Care Technicians (PCT) at the Adult Education building in St. George that Renee Rivers and Jean Nisbet had spruced up for the students. In 130 hours of training, PCTs learn to draw blood and do other technical tasks in hospitals.

PCTs are a step up from CNAs in pay and skills. The 27 people who had graduated by March 2006—who all found jobs—earned an average of \$10 per hour, as opposed to an average of \$7.85 per hour for CNAs.

Also, because they work in hospitals, they are exposed to other careers in specialties such as radiology, respiratory therapy and special testing.

By putting together the Pre-CNA, CNA, and PCT courses, the PRC team had created a “health care career ladder,” where people can gain training, get their first job, and rise step by step to higher skills, responsibility and pay.

Howisha’s Story

Howisha McFadden, 25, climbed that career ladder, graduating from both the CNA and the PCT programs. Before the course, the single mother of three had been grinding away at a low-paying call center job, making Holiday Inn reservations for strangers on the phone.

“There is a sense of hopelessness around here,” she said. “Like, ‘Oh well, I know I can’t find anything better because I don’t have the education.’”

When she saw a flyer in a gas station for the CNA and PCT courses, McFadden signed up right away.



Howisha McFadden graduated from both the Certified Nursing Assistant and the Patient Care Technician programs. Here she is with the Reverend John H. Elliott, a key leader on the local PRC team and head of the Ministerial Alliance in the St. George area.

During her rotation at the Summerville Medical Center, McFadden observed a doctor perform a Caesarean section. “Just to be there in the room with the doctors and everybody – just being there to comfort [the patient], that brought a lot of joy,” McFadden said.

McFadden says some of her friends got interested in the CNA program once they learned of it. “When they see you doing something positive, they want to get on board and do what you’re doing,” she noted.

It has affected her family, too. Her one-year-old has started toddling around the house with a book in her hand. “Now my daughter sees my homework,” McFadden said. “Instead of saying, ‘Mama’s just going to a job,’ she says, ‘I want to be like my mother.’ That’s how it makes a difference.”

Because McFadden and about 67 other graduates of the PRC health courses live in St. George, they put most of their earnings back into the local marketplace. The economic impact on St. George alone is substantial, Renee Rivers said.

Job Training for Manufacturing

The other significant job training element of the program takes place at O-C Tech. Orangeburg County is home to a fair number of manufacturing plants, where O-C Tech faculty already had longstanding consulting relationships.

Good jobs, like the PRC is designed to create, are

often manufacturing jobs. So PRC board member Rebecca Battle-Bryant, dean of Continuing Education at O-C Tech, called on her contacts in industry and set up a “pre-employment manufacturing” (PEM) training program to prepare students for entry-level jobs at five local plants.

As in the health care courses, PRC money pays for students’ tuition and books. The students could never afford the cost otherwise, about \$1000, said PRC coordinator Kim Sturgeon.

In the 96-hour course, students learn how to read a blueprint; safely use power saws, drills and other tools; build rigging for moving equipment around a site; do construction math; and acquire other plant-floor skills. They spend four hours a day in class, three days a week, for eight weeks.

People with manufacturing experience—not academics—teach the courses. To pass, students must demonstrate mastery of skills in front of an instructor.

The PEM training has credibility with instructors because it is based on the “Work Keys” system, a national manufacturing skills test that many South Carolina employers use to screen their applicants, said Cushman Phillips, who runs the courses.

“Most consider it more valid than a high school diploma,” Phillips said. “It tests performance rather than ‘seat time’ in class.”

Sen. Matthews of the PRC board used up political chits to persuade the plant representatives to promise every PEM graduate an interview.

Demand for the training is furious. “At the first meeting, 400 people showed up for 20 training slots,” Matthews said.

So far, 57 people of the 71 who began the course have graduated. About 36 were employed and making an average of \$8.63 per hour as of March 2006. For most, it is their first job with benefits. A fair number are single mothers.

“If we can keep a stream of 8 to 12 graduates every six months, we can place those people,” said Sturgeon.

Many students had never handled tools, equipment, and machinery before the class, said Phillips. Also, as in the CNA courses, some students were simply not job-ready. So part of the course teaches work habits like showing up on time, proper dress, and how to interview.

“Some of the students have a hard time adjusting to the fact that they really have to be there at 8 a.m., if not 7:50,” said Cushman, a former nuclear engineer.

The PEM program helped turn things around for Roslyn Baker, who had been out of work for seven years.

She had applied several times to air conditioning maker Allied Air and always been rejected. Once she went through the PEM course, they called her. She started as a temp at \$8.50 an hour, was made permanent, and now earns \$10 per hour. She has

finally been able to buy a used car, a burgundy 1998 Dodge Stratus.

“You go seven years without employment and all of a sudden you get hired at a job you wanted,” local coordinator Garon Jackson said. “You can tell how happy and thankful they are to get that opportunity.”

Truck Driving Classes

When Phillips, coordinator of the PEM program, got a phone call from a trucking company desperate for licensed commercial drivers one day, he saw that the PRC should experiment with funding students to attend the Commercial Drivers’ License (CDL) course at the college. Truck driving is booming locally as a way to transport the goods that arrive at Charleston’s seaport. Phillips sees nonstop high demand for the next 10 to 15 years.

PRC funds paid for five people to complete the five-week class. All of them were immediately hired at jobs paying \$30,000 to \$35,000 a year.

“You can go from zero income to \$35,000 in five weeks – that’s pretty attractive,” Phillips said.

Preparing Rural Entrepreneurs

Believing that starting small businesses is one of the best ways to invigorate stagnant economies like that of the LO/UD region, the PRC tried to start a small business course for would-be entrepreneurs.

The first attempt failed. LO/UD pitched a joint effort with the small business development program at South Carolina State University in Orangeburg, but the school lacked

the staff to send to the area.

Then they turned to Rural Entrepreneurial Action Learning (REAL), the program that helped LeAnn Grimes open her Olde Tyme General Store in the PRC program based in Sparta, N.C.

REAL classes started in 2005. About 12 people have graduated. Two have started businesses—a power washing company and a one-woman home health care service—and a third has strengthened her catering business, said Sturgeon.

Now Trident Tech and Orangeburg-Calhoun Tech are both delivering the REAL program—the only providers in the state. They have agreed to train other tech colleges to teach the course.

MDC Behind the Scenes

MDC’s role in every PRC site is different. In the LO/UD area, MDC had to intervene early to put the first PRC team on the right track.

The original grant proposal had too much money slated for staff and overhead expenses and aimed to duplicate existing services. MDC Senior Staff Associate Sam Scott, who acted as the team’s coach, guided the group to re-write the proposal and replace the original program coordinator with Kim Sturgeon, director of development at Trident Technical College.

It was touchy. The original coordinator was black; Sturgeon is white.

There were angry confrontations, and the leadership team endured a major shakeup.

But the show went on. “MDC played a critical role in helping me and the Senator and everybody else know how to handle that,” Sturgeon said.

The group also hired Garon Jackson, a 30-year-old Bowman native with experience placing people in jobs, to run the day-to-day operations in Bowman and St. George, while Sturgeon worked out of Charleston.

Scott took the PRC board members on a tour of effective community-based organizations around the South. He provided training on consensus-building and other board skills. At his urging, the group set up a “management team” of the PRC’s 12 or so most active leaders for quicker decision-making, as well as an “executive team” of five who could take action on the spot. Scott also helped the board begin evaluating the effectiveness of their programs.

“We made our own decisions, but Sam kept us on the [PRC’s] goals,” Matthews said.

Scott saw MDC’s role this way: “Like the stereotypical athletic coach, you keep pushing, keep pushing, keep pushing to get better.”

An Unexpected Offshoot

Like a shower of sparks from a fire, other progress arose out of the many face-to-face meetings and conversations among PRC leaders.

For example, Matthews found himself building a biracial group of leaders in the area to discuss other community problems – unbelievably, a first for the area.

“We’re friendly, but we really don’t know each other,” said Matthews of local whites and blacks. “We never really talked about community issues, and how to solve some of our community’s problems.”

Matthews and the chairman of the Orangeburg-Calhoun Technical College board, a white dairy farmer named Brian Patrick, decided to bring some people together to talk about schools. “He said he’d find 10 whites and I said I’d find 10 blacks,” Matthews related.

As a result of the discussions, Matthews said, the group helped get a referendum passed on raising taxes to build a new high school—Bethune-Bowman School, a handsome brick building that houses kindergarten through 12th grade.

“It’s the first time we’ve had a referendum that will cost the community, and the white community didn’t fight it,” Matthews said.

After PRC Ends

For most PRC sites in the Carolinas, the program winds down this year. But the LO/UD group has been chosen as one of four PRC sites in South Carolina to carry on with an additional year of funding.

Matthews said the board plans to continue all its programs, including all its job training, at the current levels. He also expects some state money to come through, if the state House and governor cooperate. Rural entrepreneurship training will be a major focus, Sturgeon said.

In the meantime, leaders are setting up a new community development

corporation that Matthews hopes will be well-established enough to keep the PRC initiatives going after the additional year of funding ends.

“We want to sustain the model and try to replicate it up and down the I-95 corridor,” he said.

Looking Back

In the big picture, the Program for the Rural Carolinas has lifted dozens of people in Orangeburg and Dorchester counties out of chronic unemployment and into jobs with a future.

Most importantly, it has built a powerful new alliance of black and white local leaders who are re-igniting the area’s moribund economy. In South Carolina, where history has driven a wedge between the races, that’s especially important.

“It’s done more than create jobs,” said Sen. Matthews. “It’s begun to physically bring this community together and have some racial harmony where we can have some discussions. That’s going to be the lasting legacy of The Program for the Rural Carolinas.”