

Rural teachers are the heroes in 'Corridor of Shame'

COLUMBIA PR man Bud Ferillo has produced an effective advocacy piece, highlighting the need for more funding in many of our state's rural public schools. His documentary, "Corridor of Shame," is most effective when the dedicated professionals working in those schools speak.

Many of those teachers stand out for the way they are able to contrast their present school environments with the alternatives they are giving up.

Paul Hudacko, a teacher and coach at Creek Bridge High School in Marion 7, could have taught in one of the state's more prosperous districts. But he says he would not trade his job at Creek Bridge, a seventh- through 12th-grade school with 444 students.

"When I come to school every day, they don't call me 'Coach,'" Mr. Hudacko says. "They don't call me 'Mr. Hudacko.' They call me 'Dad.' Some of the kids call me 'Dad,' and I'm not even five years



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The average salary at Creek Bridge is \$33,888. At Mr. Hudacko's alma mater, Lexington-Richland 5's Dutch Fork High School, the average teacher salary is \$44,000. That is also the average salary for high school teachers in the next county over from Mr. Hudacko's school, at Socastee High School in Horry County.

Merdell Nesbit, the English Department chairman at Creek Bridge, like Mr. Hudacko and

older than some of them.

"So that connection right there is the main reason to stay here. It's not the wealth or the inequality of wealth, it's the love of these kids and the fact that we touch their lives."

many of the other teachers in the documentary, tears up when talking about the choices she has made and the role she is able to play in her students' lives.

"I love the kids," she says. "I know what they need every day they come to school. Sometimes it's, 'How's your grandmother?' 'Do you have a pencil?' 'Did you eat lunch yesterday?' I know what they need every day when they come to school and they need me."

"If I am absent, they will call my house to find out why I did not come to work."

Thirteen years ago, Ms. Nesbit interviewed where she teaches today and at Spring Valley High School in Richland 2. Ms. Nesbit, a Denmark, S.C., native who succeeded far beyond her small-town beginnings, says the choice was made for her during a tour of Marion County schools.

"The superintendent asked me to walk through his schools before I signed with them and I did," Ms. Nesbit says. "I signed because

when I walked through the schools, I saw myself sitting in a desk. And I knew how to reach me in every face that I saw."

Today, the average teacher salary at the school Ms. Nesbit rejected, Spring Valley, is \$42,171.

That thousands-of-dollars difference in what they are making versus what they could be making elsewhere is cited again and again by the teachers featured in "Corridor of Shame."

They have made the choice to forgo the money in favor of what they see as a greater mission. That choice is not for everyone, however. One of the greatest frustrations some in the documentary express is watching the annualodus of good, ambitious teachers moving to other districts where they will be better paid, thanks to a better local property tax base.

The meager state funding for South Carolina's schools hits more than teacher salaries.

As Archie Franchini, the principal specialist at Estill High

School in Hampton 2, speaks in the documentary, the screen shows library books at the school printed in the 1930s, 40s and 50s.

"When I picked up one book it said, 'One day man will land on the moon,'" Mr. Franchini says. "And here we are in the next century. That's not good enough for our young people."

Ironically, as Mr. Ferillo's documentary is being distributed, there is talk in the State House of a pilot project as an alternative to "Put Parents in Charge." The plan to give tax credits to parents to reimburse them for private school tuition would be scaled back, offered only to those parents in so-called failing schools.

How about another suggestion for a pilot project?

What if the Legislature decided to pay teachers at Creek Bridge the same salaries they would make at Dutch Fork, Spring Valley or Socastee?

What if lawmakers engaged in a pilot project to adequately sup-

ply the library at Estill High School?

It seems that some lawmakers would prefer to set up an entirely new school system, rather than help the one we've got. What a waste.

Take the time to watch "Corridor of Shame" and you will be inspired by the words of people who can only be described as missionaries. They have given up material comforts and adequate professional support to go where they are needed, where they hope to change lives.

Those who should be ashamed upon seeing this documentary are the lawmakers who have allowed Third World conditions to exist and thrive, right in our own backyard.

For more on the documentary, go to www.corridorofshame.com. Contact Ms. Brook at nbrook@thestate.com.