

Press Room



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Signs of Progress by Brian Lagoda, 10th Grade Gwinnett School of Mathematics, Science and Technology



*Left to right:
Brian Lagoda and
Marsha Anderson Bomar*

Photo by Brandy Walker

DULUTH, GA - October 16, 2008 - Part of GSMST's uniqueness lies in the professional relationships with various businesses and educational institutions that give the school a connection to the community. Last year, through our partnership program, many of this year's sophomores met with members of these companies and universities, and heard from them. However, these encounters provided only an introduction, and we still have much to learn. Journalism is taking the initiative to do a partner spotlight, to focus a little more on individual partners and present a clearer picture.

Surveying the Scene

Street Smarts, located only a couple of minutes from our school, looks like any ordinary office space from the outside. Once inside, however, it is apparent that this place is extraordinary. As I waited in the lobby on Tuesday, September 30, I saw a table covered with children's toys that were being collected for a donation. The feeling of hospitality was surprising; I was even offered a can of Coke as I waited for my host. Ms. Marsha Anderson Bomar, the excited, optimistic woman who is responsible for the existence of Street Smarts, took me to her office. Here, as I sat on a comfortable couch, in a room more like a cozy study than an executive office, decorated by various brightly colored objects, including traffic-related children's toys and a bicycle that Ms. Bomar intended to ride home, I got to hear a little about Street Smarts and why they are interested in GSMST.

Street Smarts is a planning and engineering firm, started by Ms. Bomar in 1990, which now also has branches in Texas and Florida. They work in all sorts of different parts of road construction and management. In order to fulfill such a broad task, the company functions as the convergence of five different departments, each of which I will elaborate on a little bit later: Traffic and Transportation, Engineering Services, Data Smarts, Public Involvement, and Planning and Design. They will be moving this November to a new building, in order to accommodate their growing needs. After learning a little background on the company from Ms. Bomar, I was ready to see the different departments at work.

Five-Way Intersection

Although it was exciting to visit the various departments and see what they had to offer the company, what impressed me the most wasn't the facts I learned or the activities I watched. I thought the use of manual survey equipment by the Engineering Services department was brilliant, but what really piqued my interest was seeing the information they gathered input into AutoCAD - a program that we're all familiar with at GSMST. This



information could then be used in analysis by other departments, for instance their Public Involvement department, in order to prepare a presentation. Data Smarts, a department devoted to collecting unique traffic information, perhaps by surveying motorists in traffic or at a shopping center, is an original way to learn the most possible about a roadside situation. However, the way this information is implemented, perhaps by a team trying to decide whether to widen a road, that allowed the data collected to really shine. The Traffic and Transportation department's demonstration of an intersection traffic light control (those big boxes at intersections) was notable, but I found myself more interested by the way the program written for that control used so much data collected by other departments. The fifth department, Planning and Design, also participated in this continuous flow of information, but I'll discuss them in more detail later.

Even though there are 5 distinct departments, there were no walls preventing collaboration. Even the cubicles there either fit multiple people or have windows, or both, in order to amplify this connectedness and prevent isolation. From what I saw, the cleverest thing about the company is that everyone is free to work with everyone, and it appeared that they do. Although I honestly don't know the relative importance of the various departments, one, by concept, stood out as the most interesting to me as a GSMST student.

Merging the Lanes of Thought

The last department I visited, Planning and Design, was certainly a counterintuitive innovation. I saw three people, working separately at desks in a sort of an 'E' shape. This obviously implied collaboration, and the outside two people were civil engineers, which makes sense in an engineering firm. The counterintuitive part is that the third person, in between the two engineers, was a landscape architect - fundamentally an artist. While I watched, the artist was drawing out a potential use for a piece of land, apparently her eighth draft, and the engineers were each drawing something out in AutoCAD. Two left-brained engineers with a right-brained artist in between sounds like a punishment for everyone, and had I been able to think of this before, I would have expected to find resentment. On the contrary, this room was full of synergy.

As Ms. Bomar said, "One of the things that's different in our approach than some of our colleague companies is that we have blended the landscape architecture planning design element with the engineering element." The department's job was to take an empty piece of land and do something with it. This broad task requires a whole-brained approach, so while the artist can create a big picture, the engineers can create the details and pay attention to the logistics, and they can keep each other in check. Working constantly together is a catalyst for productivity. Since many of my peers are artistically inclined, yet attending a school for math, science, and technology, this struck me as a sign for their future, perhaps not only here, but in a similar collaborative process elsewhere.

Infrastructure

Since Street Smarts is a partner with GSMST, I wanted an explanation why they are interested in us. Ms. Bomar feels that, "We all believe that we have to invest in folks at a very young age, to make sure that they know what their choices are, and then if they choose to follow a path that leads them to a company like this, or to college to get a degree to bring them here that they are very well prepared." Street Smarts is funding and influencing the metaphorical infrastructure of the workforce. Just as streets get us where we are going on a daily basis, education is a huge part of what gets us where we are going in life.

We are certainly on the right track. GSMST students all have a familiarity with AutoCAD, a computer drafting program. I'm pretty sure that I saw at least one person in every department using AutoCAD, and even though we focused mainly on sketching industrial widgets rather than roads, the fundamental skill is the same. Also, our curriculum has an obvious emphasis on math and science, requisites for a career in engineering. Finally, one of the most unique features of GSMST, integration between apparently unrelated subjects (which is a direction we are working toward), is itself a fundamental feature of Street Smarts, who is a model of integration's success. That's pretty smart.