



NEWS RELEASE

U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS

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For Immediate Release:
June 9, 2010

Contact:
Jo Anita Miley, 256-895-1585
JoAnita.Miley@us.army.mil

Center mothers inspire their children to go from good to great

Jo Anita Miley
Public Affairs Office

Moms often have the ability to inspire and motivate those around them – especially their children.

With Mother's Day coming up, four Huntsville Center mothers shared their stories.

Featured are Margaret Simmons, chief, Office of Counsel and Tonju Butler, Pre-award Team B branch chief, Center Contracting and their daughters, Shannon Walls and Jade Greene, both students in Center Contracting; Yazmine Gerousis, management analyst, Resource Management Office and Lequita Byrd-Craig, contract specialist, Center Contracting, and their sons, Michael J. Cook and Andrew Craig-Byrd, respectively.

Margaret Simmons said her typical work day begins around 8 a.m., and is filled with meetings, e-mails, phones calls and responding to legal issues that may arise within Huntsville Center and other Corps of Engineers offices until her day ends well after 5 p.m. However, in spite of this hectic schedule, she tries to schedule time each day for eating lunch with her daughter, Shannon Walls, whenever she is in town.

Walls started work in Central Contracting at Huntsville Center in December 2009. She attends Calhoun Community College, pursuing a degree in business. Walls said when she was looking for a part-time job; her mom encouraged her to consider working for the government, and thinks there will be many opportunities for her with the federal government.

Walls said working at Huntsville Center has been an eye-opening experience for her. Although she is not motivated toward pursuing a law degree, through watching Simmons at work in Huntsville Center, she recognizes that she gets her hard work ethic from her mom.

Simmons has made it clear to her daughter that her working at the Center does not mean easy access.

“For me, my daughter understands that I have a job, and that sometimes when she wants to see me, she will have to wait. I'm fortunate that she understands that although she is my child, that at the office, work comes first over our relationship (unless it is an emergency),” Simmons said. “I have to respect the same thing if I go over to visit her for a moment and she's unavailable. We both respect each other as professionals.”

Walls said Simmons has given her good advice over the years, but one thing in particular has stuck with her.

“My mom’s main advice to me is I can be anything I want to be. If I work hard and put my heart into it – there is nothing I can’t do,” Walls said.

While Walls said her mom inspires her toward greatness, Lequita Byrd-Craig, said her son, Andrew Byrd-Craig, is the source of her inspiration -- to do community service. It is never too early to teach children the value of community service.

Since October 2009, Byrd-Craig said she has worked months on end with her 2 ½ year old son, Andrew, teaching him the art of pageantry, and the importance of giving back to his community by helping others, through Charity Pageant Productions, LLC, and an agency based in Birmingham, Ala., that sponsors pageant competitions.

Byrd-Craig said Charity Pageant Productions, LLC is different from other pageantry agencies. The contestants don’t compete for money or prizes; pageants allow money to be donated to non-profit agencies. Contestants can combine their community service with something they enjoy. Together, mother and son have raised more than \$650 for the various charities throughout Alabama this year.

Her aunt recommended that she considered entering Andrew in his first pageant competition. She mentioned early on seeing traits in Andrew that she thought would afford him success in pageants, and encouraged Byrd-Craig to give it a shot.

“The pageants are a great way to teach the importance of volunteer service at all ages. They always have a purpose that is focused on raising funds for a cause,” Byrd-Craig said. “Andrew’s first pageant was the Queen and King of Hearts Pageant in Trussville, Ala. We raised money for the American Heart Association.”

In October 2009, Byrd-Craig said she decided she needed to do more for charity, and signed up for her first pageant.

Byrd-Craig holds the title Miss Heart of America, Madison County Division. Competing in pageant competitions has helped her to overcome shyness and improve her self esteem, she said. She will represent Madison County in the state finals Nov. 13.

Byrd-Craig said a lot is involved in preparing for a pageant. Judges score contestants on their appearance, personality, poise, posture, talent, and clothing during pageant competitions. For children, it is very important to know where they must stand on stage during a competition. She works with Andrew to make sure he is prepared in all these areas.

According to Byrd-Craig, in the children’s competition, Andrew gets a toy car and a shiny new crown. He gets the toy car with or without a win; but for her, she said the end result is different.

“I can go and collect crowns all day long (I have lots of them). What really matters more to me is helping others,” Byrd-Craig said. “I must instill in Andrew the same values while he is young.”

While Byrd-Craig stresses the importance of mothers teaching important values to children, Yazmine Gerousis said she found the courage to allow her son Michael Cook to find his own path, and follow it as far as it leads.

Gerousis has worked more than 22 years in government service, and said she enjoys working in the business field, especially her current job as a management analyst. But, as far back as she can remember, Gerousis said she has always been mesmerized by the work that engineers do.

For Gerousis, the salary an engineer made was higher than careers in the liberal arts field, and secretly envisioned her son Michael growing up and becoming one. However, at an early age, it became clear to her that Cook was more interested in music.

“I recognized my son’s talent and passion for music when he was only 7 years old. Music has always been in our family,” Gerousis said. My son’s great-grandparents were musicians. His grandma Flory was a country music singer and guitar player in Eagle Mountain, Ala., in the 70s,” Gerousis said. “His dad was a musician. Michael watched him write songs and play the guitar since he was old enough to walk.”

Gerousis said when Cook finally asked to learn to play the guitar, there was no one to teach him since she and his father had divorced.

Cook relentlessly asked Gerousis for lessons, determined to learn the instrument.

“I knew I didn’t have an ear for music, but I knew he did. I finally told him that he didn’t need anyone to teach him to play the guitar because he was born with music in his veins.”

Cook practiced for hours. At 12 years old, he joined a band and was composing his own songs.

Gerousis said she put her dream of Cook becoming an engineer on the back burner. She knew Michael was very talented.

“The first time I saw my son playing in a band, it gave me chills,” Gerousis said. “I knew he was good at it, and let him follow his own path.”

Cook said he is glad Gerousis allowed him to pursue music, and he still has the first guitar she bought him. But he is not limiting his career goals to music.

“I still have what my mom calls a “back-up plan.” I am a student at Calhoun Community College, and although I haven’t declared a major, I know my mom is right that a good education is a foundation for success,” Cook said. “This advice has prepared me for the future, no matter what career I go into.”

Tonju Butler said she has a similar view on steering children toward their career path. However, Butler said sometimes it is a good practice for a mom to diligently steer a child toward success – even if they can't see the big picture yet.

Butler's daughter, Jade Greene is a sophomore at Alabama Agricultural and Mechanical University. She said she wanted her first work experience to be in the business field. She watched her mom work in this field for many years, and knew her mom loved her job.

Greene said making the decision to work at Huntsville Center was a great career move for her. She has gained valuable work experience and allowed her to develop skills that will afford her an opportunity for federal service or work in the private sector upon graduating college.

"My mom takes her job seriously, and has always mentored me. All of my life, she's stressed how important establishing focused goals for me and being independent are," Greene said. "She continues to teach me the value of becoming an asset to this organization."

For Greene, there are no disadvantages to working at Huntsville Center with her mom. She said since she lives in the dormitory, it's always advantageous to have a mentor within reach.

"For me, my mom's best advice to me is never say I can't (do something), and don't even quit (what I start)," Green said. "This advice makes me very optimistic about my future."

Butler, a seasoned contracting professional with 22 years federal service, holds a bachelor's degree in business administration and marketing; and is working on her master's degree. Butler is responsible for managing an acquisition budget that ranges from \$10 million to \$4 billion a year, and mentors the five contract specialist on her team.

Butler said she has a high standard of professionalism, and expects her daughter to develop one of her own. She wants Greene to find her niche, and work hard at it.

Butler said she tries to lead by example. The best advice she's given Greene about making career choices is to choose a career field that interests her and she has a passion for; pursue that career to the fullest, making sure she puts herself on the path to success; and to always have a back-up plan, because she won't necessarily land the job of her dreams the first time out.

The relationship between a mother and child can be described in many ways.

For these four moms, parenting is approached in a different manner. However, they all agree that they have given their child an essential tool for success. One mom said she placed special emphasis on teaching her child the value of developing a strong work ethic and mutual professionalism, another said she is working hard to instill in her child a desire to embrace the power of community service. One mom said she dared to release her child to pursue his own

passion for music, while another said she instilled in her child the importance of diligent preparation for the future and professionalism. Ultimately, their children all agree on one thing about their moms: Mom inspired them to go from “good to great.”