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College bus tour comes to speak with students

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Arnold Hernandez told a group of mostly minority and low-income students last week that they shouldn't consider a college education a lost cause.

"I did it, and so can they," said Hernandez, guest speaker at a series of workshops at E.E. Waddell High School.

Hernandez, who grew up in a migrant farm working family in Texas and earned a college degree, was in Charlotte on Monday with the Sallie Mae Fund's Paying for College Bus Tour.

The tour is on a 65-city coast-to-coast tour, spreading the message that all high school students can find a way to get a college education.

The stop in Charlotte included a pair of workshops for Waddell students, then a program in the evening for students and family members from all area schools.

For Hernandez, the first member of his family to attend college, Waddell High was a good stopping place. Nearly 85 percent of Waddell's students are minorities, and more than 61 percent qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, a measure of poverty.

Both those numbers are well above the CMS average.

"I wasn't a straight-A student," said Hernandez, who received a bachelor's degree from St. Edward University in Austin, Texas, and later became a TV journalist in that city. "I had teachers tell me that I was not college material, that I wouldn't make it.

"But I worked hard. I looked for scholarships. I wrote a lot of essays, did a lot of research. And I graduated from college without needing to take out a single loan."

The Sallie Mae Fund is a major originator of student loans, but the bus tour was sponsored by the Sallie Mae Foundation, which provides scholarships and encourages students to look for all types of financial aid -- grants, work-study programs, and scholarships, in addition to loans.

Kathleen deLaski , president of the Sallie Mae Fund, said the organization conducted a survey two years ago and found that 27 percent of families attending the workshops believed that their children could attend college before the workshop. But after the workshop, 82 percent of those same families said they believed college was an attainable possibility.

Among those who heard Hernandez's message Monday was Waddell High junior Wilmesha Austin, 17, who hopes to be her family's first member to attend college.

"I plan to apply for every scholarship I can," Austin said. "I've done some research, and I found a lot of them that I didn't know about."

Hernandez told students that his parents never talked to him about attending college.

Austin said it's different in her family.

"My mother talks to me all the time about college," said Austin, who plans to attend Winthrop University in Rock Hill.

Austin said her involvement with Communities in Schools, an organization that provides various types of support for low-income and minority students, has helped prepare her for college.

"CIS gave us an idea of what we would have to do, in order to attend college," she said. "They helped us plan for everything we'll have to do in our senior year. I've prepared. CIS was a big help."