

# NCstate

ALUMNI MAGAZINE

## WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

### Bridget Durkan Laird '98

**THEN:** Soccer player

**NOW:** CEO, WINGS afterschool program



**S**hy and easy to overlook, Tyrone was the kind of kid who was ideal for WINGS, an afterschool program based in Charleston, S.C. The eighth-grader liked track, but his public school didn't have a team. So Bridget Laird '98, the CEO of WINGS for kids, came up with a plan. The two trained together to run in a benefit 5K for breast cancer research.

When race day came, Laird picked up Tyrone's grandmother and brother so they could watch. They found a spot near the finish line, and when Tyrone came around a corner and pulled into view, his grandmother ran onto the course to give him a huge hug. Tyrone proudly wore his participation medal to bed that evening.

"I just felt that moment, that whole two months, was an opportunity to see how WINGS affected his life," Laird says. "That finishing of the race made me realize that he learned about goal-setting and delayed gratification. I thought it was a really great lesson for him."

The purpose of WINGS is to put more kids on track to learn that lesson. Conceived as a rigorous afterschool program, WINGS recruits children from low-income families who are struggling academically or who have behavior or family issues. After their regular school day, the kids—the majority of whom are between kindergarten and fifth grade—head to WINGS for three more hours of learning.

"We are very serious and have a very serious curriculum," Laird says.

"That's making good decisions, behaving well and building healthy friendships."

While playing women's soccer at NC State (she walked on her freshman year and was team captain by the time she was a senior) and working toward a degree in parks, recreation and tourism, Laird foresaw a career in non-profit organizations. She moved to Charleston after college and latched on at WINGS. After earning a master's degree in education, Laird worked her way up to chief program officer. When WINGS founder Ginny Deerin announced her retirement, Laird became CEO of the organization in January.

As she settles in to her new role, Laird will be in charge of navigating WINGS through any future expansion outside of Charleston. It seems to have built a solid foundation in the Palmetto State—Laird says she has data that indicates students in the WINGS program graduate from high school at a rate 40 percent higher than students from comparable public schools.

"I think the most rewarding thing is the difference we make in the kids' lives," Laird says. "Because we're so serious about tracking our outcomes, we can actually watch that data and see that we are."

—Jack Daly '01

