By Jennie Bedsworth

A SCHOOL CALLED HOME

Piney Woods School in rural Mississippi offers students a jump start on the future

At age 15, Xavier Spann already knows he wants to be a veterinarian.

He's fairly sure he'll specialize in animal reproductive health when he begins his career. He's experienced at artificial insemination, and a year ago he was already receiving college application packets in the mail. He was the only ninth grader he knows of who took the ACT exam.

What drives this teenager's motivation? He says it's fueled by the opportunities he has had attending and living at Piney Woods School, located in rural Mississippi.

For Spann, coming to Piney Woods represented a lifestyle change. His father serves in the Coast Guard, and he and his family often relocated. He went to so many elementary schools he can't remember them all offhand. Leaving behind new friends and settling down in new states, from Virginia to Texas, was familiar to him.

In August of 1999, Spann was given an opportunity many youths still dream of. He began the first of four consecutive years at Piney Woods. He'd wanted to go there since his grandmother told him about it when he was little, and waited years to be old enough.

"My grandmother wanted my mother and aunts and uncles to go there before it was as prestigious as it is today," he says.

In eighth grade, the time was right. Spann applied to Piney Woods and was accepted. He is more fortunate than many others who are turned down each year. However, students are not turned down for financial reasons, explains Billy Sumrall, Piney Woods agriculture director. The private school is a rural, faith-based organization that was started by a St. Joseph, Mo., native nearly 100 years ago. A 500-acre teaching farm, where students work and learn about agriculture, is adjoined to the school's main campus.

Laurence Jones, who founded...