

St. Gerard Campus gets grant to build new lab

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For now, the mothers or mothers-to-be who study at St. Gerard Campus get their science education from textbooks and a little computer research.

The one-classroom high school at St. Gerard Campus has no microscopes, Bunsen burners, specimens or slides. The science department is made up of a broken skeleton, a spine and a skull tucked away on top of a cabinet in a corner of the one-room schoolhouse.

“So they have no hands-on experience,” said Maria Gleason, grant administrator for St. Gerard Campus and director of the pregnancy center.

But things are about to change.

The Meninak Club of Jacksonville recently awarded St. Gerard Campus a \$30,000 grant for construction of a science lab on the campus, on U.S. 1 near State Road 312. The grant will fund construction of the building but not equipment or completion of the interior.

The lab will give students the hands-on experience they need to earn lab credits on their transcript and will better prepare them for the future, St. Gerard officials said. Having lab credits will allow students to compete for certain scholarships.

Officials would also like to use the lab to host a certified nursing assistant program.

St. Gerard Campus, which has been part of the community for around 30 years, is a nonprofit organization that helps pregnant teenagers women of all ages. Among other things, the organization provides free pregnancy testing and sonograms, adoption counseling and help getting the basics such as food and clothing.

The Campus also houses an interfaith Christian high school, which is fully accredited and provides daycare for students.

The small white buildings that make up the campus include a kitchen, one-room schoolhouse and attached computer laboratory, nursery and day care for the babies. Babies stay in the classroom with mothers for the first two months after birth.

Some students are brought to school every day in a couple of campus vans. Some students stay in the on campus and learn life skills including cooking and budgeting and how to be good mothers. They're often paired up in the rooms.

Gleason said the program serves the women's emotional, physical and spiritual needs as well; and strives to empower the women and give them confidence.

“They come to us very, very hopeless,” Gleason said.

Officials at St. Gerard Campus help guide young women toward a career that can help support their children and break cycles of poverty and welfare that many grew up in.

Some of the graduates have gone into medical-related careers and the science lab may better prepare them for that, said Caroline Wolff, founder and director of St. Gerard Campus.

“We wanted to help them to be able to obtain that goal,” she said.

St. Gerard Campus competed with other charities for the grant, which is awarded annually. It made a presentation to members of Meninak in August.

Claude Moulton, a Jacksonville attorney and charity committee chair said St. Gerard was funded because of its mission and track record. And because of the number of successes — women who go on to find solid employment.

“They are helping people who otherwise wouldn’t get services,” he said. “Nowadays I believe what they do is not duplicated too many places.”

Plans for the lab are drawn. Construction could take four months. The grant will pay for lights, floors, windows and walls. The remaining needs will have to come from somewhere else.

Gleason said the next step is contacting universities about getting the used equipment that the schools no longer want. Officials will also be writing a grant request for equipment.

Once the lab is finished, students will be able to study a full range of sciences including anatomy, biology, physics and marine science. And once they graduate, they will be more competitive.

“This prepares them much, much better,” Gleason said.

Breakout

Anyone interested in donating equipment or building supplies can call St. Gerard Campus at 829-5516. Gleason said the organization is also in need of a new van to help take students to and from class.

St. Gerard Campus is hosting its 30th annual fashion show and silent auction at the World Golf Village Renaissance Resort on Saturday, Dec. 14, from noon to 3:30 p.m. Proceeds go to pregnant teenagers and new teen mothers at St. Gerard Campus. Tickets are \$35. Men’s women’s and children’s fashions will be modeled. The silent auction will include more than 100 pieces of art, sports memorabilia and other items.

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