

## St. Gerard Campus helps pregnant women, single mothers

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St. Gerard Campus doesn't like to turn anyone away. The nonprofit crisis pregnancy center and high school has been in operation since 1981.

Each year, the campus provides free pregnancy tests and services for about 1,000 women ranging from 13 to 40 years old.

"We are a total facility," said Maria Gleason, grant administrator. "We don't send our girls to another place to go to school or send them to a different day care center. They get it all right here."

Because of its religious affiliation and pro-life mission, it receives no federal money. It relies instead on grants, donations and volunteer help.

The high school is fully accredited with licensed and certified teachers across all subjects. It seats between 25 to 30 students at a time, processing about 65 students annually.

St. Gerard is a state-licensed foster care home for teens 13 to 18 years old and their babies. Those who have no place to stay while completing their high school diploma can live on campus year-round.

Residency is needs-based and the campus can house six teens and their babies at a time.

Two housemothers living on-site 24/7 teach students how to care for their infants through the night. They also drive students to and from appointments, including doctor visits.

The girls learn to clean for themselves, do laundry, cook, shop for nutritious food, calculate a budget and live within their means.

### Missing parts

Last year, St. Gerard built a science lab through donations and a \$30,000 grant from the Meniak Club of Jacksonville.

The intent was to give students the ability to earn the lab credits necessary to compete for scholarships.

The school needs microscopes, slides, globes, Bunsen burners, desks and other lab equipment.

"We're really looking for help trying to get this done," Gleason said. "Right now, they're learning science out of a book and chemistry out of a book. They have no lab experience whatsoever."

As it stands, the anatomy department consists of a skeleton missing an arm and a leg. She said they are hoping to have what they need by September.

"We want to be able to teach them things that encourage them to go into the fields women don't normally go into,"

Gleason said.

St. Gerard also wants to start a certified nursing assistant program. Sixty-five percent of the school's graduates pursue further education and careers in nursing and medical assistance.

"We're the only ones in the United States like this," said Caroline Wolff, director and founder of St. Gerard.

### Prepared mothers

Many girls who go to St. Gerard have already dropped out of school or come from foster care.

Some are angry at the world. Others have just found out they are pregnant and are scared of what their parents and family might think.

"This is a hard place," Gleason said. "These girls usually have the toughest route."

Confidential counseling is available for students and with parents, a boyfriend or a husband as necessary.

"It's not just normal, teenage angst we're dealing with," she said. "This is special."

Teens in residence can stay at the campus until graduation, as long as their baby is younger than 2 years old. But the school also provides services and resources to women of all ages.

Gleason said they do what they can to at least give something to anyone who comes to them. There's no crisis too big or small.

Still, there's time for girls to be girls.

"This is serious stuff, but God has a good sense of humor," Wolff said. "With everything you're doing, there's something crazy that's happening, too, so get your laughs while you can."

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