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SLC Education Foundation reaches silver anniversary

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FOR YOUR VOICE NEWS & VIEWS

ST. LUCIE COUNTY — In 1990, St. Lucie County gained an organization that connects private sector donations with public school teachers and students in the form of grants and scholarships.

Now, 25 years later, the Education Foundation of St. Lucie County is celebrating a quarter-century of accomplishments.

Even though the Foundation funneled \$120,000 in funds to educators and \$60,000 to students last year, the organization's Executive Director, Thom Jones, said a little more community awareness could go a long way.

"One of my major jobs is to reach out to the private sector and tell them the great story about the St. Lucie school district," Jones said. "A lot of times, teachers reach into their own pockets to pay for programs. But for some things, they're able to come to the Foundation for help."

Improving graduation rates is a top priority of the Foundation and a shared goal of the St. Lucie County School District.

"The need is always greater than the funding available," Jones said. "We're all about growing the funding base through the private sector to raise more money."

Jones assumed leadership of the Foundation on Aug. 1 this year, about seven months after the sudden passing of beloved former executive director Jim McKenzie in December 2014.

The Foundation is currently in grant season, the time in the fall where teachers can apply for grants for classroom projects and resources outside their normal budget.

When spring rolls around, the foundation will shift its focus to scholarships for high school students seeking higher education.

Fort Pierce attorney Joel Zwemer of law firm Dean, Mead, Minton and Zwemer, is a long-time supporter of local education, and has recently joined the Education Foundation as a board member. He encourages businesses to invest in public education to fuel a better future for the entire community.

"If you get involved in education, it is not going to have an immediate impact on your

business. Long term, it will pay back if you're here long term," Zwemer said.

"If we can graduate students at a level where they are ready to either work or go on to college and come back to the County, then we will have a stronger workforce," Jones said.

The Education Foundation is a spin-off of the Economic Development Council (EDC), and the two are still tied closely together.

"EDC is always trying to reach out to the broader national marketplace to bring higher paying jobs here. We're one piece of the puzzle," Jones said.

Aside from preparing students to one day return to the County to live and work, the Education Foundation helps build a better narrative about the St. Lucie County School District as a whole.

When the community supports schools and schools are able to succeed, people are attracted to the area, Jones said.

"Businesses are concerned about education in St. Lucie County," Zwemer said. "Everyone I talk to agrees that both improving education itself and getting a better story out about what good things are actually here is important."

This year, the Foundation is making several efforts to connect with more than just businesses to bulk up their support network.

"We have a very high need, and we need to raise the money to meet that need," Jones said.

"Today, every dollar is meaningful. But with 40-some thousand students, if the numbers right now are in the hundreds of thousands, we'd like it to be in the millions."

On Nov. 7, the Foundation is hosting its 25th anniversary celebration banquet and the 16th annual evening for education. Dinner reservations are \$125 per person. The evening will also include a cocktail hour, live entertainment, and a silent auction.

Founding Board Members Ken Pruitt, Judi Miller, Chris Fogal, and Vernon Smith will be honored at the event.

Tickets are available on the Foundation's website, www.educationfoundationstlucie.org.

New programs to help connect individual donors to classrooms and students in need are also available on the website. By clicking on the "Get on the Bus" link, donors can adopt a class or fund a project for as little as \$25.

Jones said an upcoming program will let donors pledge \$25 per month to the Foundation for a year and receive a free beach towel as a token of appreciation.

Current Board President Carrissa Zerga of Seacoast National Bank is spearheading the Nov.



Thom Jones

7 event.

"I've always been passionate about education and about the students in our community. I say it all the time, that's our future leaders," Zerga said. "Although we've been around for 25 years, there are a lot of people around who don't know who we are or what we do."

Jones, Zwemer, Zerga and the rest of the Board have dedicated themselves to spreading the word about the Foundation to all corners of the County.

"We're reaching into the households of everyday people who may not have heard of us and giving them a way to help us out," Jones said. That, he added, is how the Foundation plans on rallying the community around the education of its youth, and its future.



Sean Boyle, executive director of the Children's Services Council of St. Lucie County presents scholarships each year through the Education Foundation of St. Lucie County. The foundation celebrates their silver anniversary in November with their annual gala.

File photo Mitch Kloorfain chief photographer