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IMPORTANT UPDATES ON SCHOOL CHOICE IN FLORIDA

Student Spotlight



Christopher Jah
Lighthouse Christian
Academy Deland, FL

About Lighthouse Christian Academy

Lighthouse Christian Academy was founded in 1973 with a preschool and opened its elementary school in 1980 in Deland. It is currently serving 323 students in grades K-12, of which 98 attend on a Step Up For Students Scholarship. The annual tuition ranges from \$2,860 in elementary school up to \$3,070 for high school, and the school offers a wide selection of courses and activities that include cheerleading, basketball and softball for girls as well as football, basketball and baseball for boys. In addition, Lighthouse has a coed bowling team for its students.

Christopher Jah's middle school years were covered in a fog of frustration and failure, but his high school became a lighthouse in more ways than one. Now thriving as a senior at Lighthouse Christian Academy in Deland, he sees both college and promise in his future.

Christopher has come full circle in his schooling. In his elementary years, he attended a neighborhood public school where he was on the honor roll for three consecutive years starting in first grade. Despite his early success, Christopher struggled in his grammar courses throughout elementary school. His challenges seemed to be an uphill battle in overcrowded classrooms where teachers were overwhelmed with questions.

Christopher's mother, Terral Smith, can recall her son's gradual decline in achievement and said that he lost his push in middle school after the family relocated just eight miles away and Christopher attended a different public school with new teachers and classmates. As Terral recalls, it was this transition that proved to be the largest hurdle for her son.

Christopher failed the sixth grade after he lost his motivation and fell to the influence of peers who made it popular not to apply himself. After repeating the sixth grade, Christopher had a successful first semester in the seventh grade and gave his mother hope. Her hope didn't last long when Christopher's academics were slipping again throughout the second half of his seventh grade year and throughout eighth grade. As Christopher entered high school, Terral knew she needed to find a more suitable school to assist her son in regaining his momentum and dreams to achieve.

"I knew if I didn't find a better fit for my son, I would end up seeing him on the evening news," Terral said. "The more time I invest now means the better person he will come out to be."

Upon hearing of his great nephew's struggles, Alonzo

Gaines informed Terral of Lighthouse Christian Academy and the opportunity for her son to attend on a Step Up For Students Scholarship, locally administered by Children First Florida. Through his community involvement, he learned of Lighthouse Christian and grew interested for Christopher.

"I had heard about Lighthouse from my great uncle Alonzo for their great academics and basketball team," Christopher, 18, said. "The teachers and sports programs really helped me regain my focus."

Terral enrolled Christopher at Lighthouse Christian Academy just four years ago at no additional cost thanks to the scholarship and generosity of corporate donors who fund the scholarship program. Terral's employer, Burger King, has been a corporate donor since 2007 with a total contribution of \$2.2-million that has funded 570 scholarships.

Lighthouse Christian Academy opened its doors 29 years ago and currently serves 323 students from Kindergarten through 12th grade. The Academy uses the A Beka Bible-based curriculum in the elementary, middle and high school campuses.

"There are fewer students per classroom here and the teachers work with me individually," Christopher said. "It is also unique because everything is taught from the Christian perspective, so for example in English we study scriptures."

Christopher has been an active student at Lighthouse. He played on the basketball team in 10th and 11th grades and on the football team for his 10th, 11th and 12th grade years. He also volunteers as a scorekeeper at the local gym and participates in the Police Athletic League.

"I am so proud of Christopher and hope that he will continue on to greater things," Terral said. "He sees the struggles I go through every day as a result of not having a college education, and I try to give my kids the best."

Want to nominate your student for our Student Spotlight? Visit www.stepupforstudents.com/parents.htm to send us your story. Or contact Jillian Metz at jmetz@stepupforstudents.com or call (866) 590-5364 ext. 231



NEWSLETTER



Lawmakers look at insurance tax credits and reduced paperwork for families

Florida lawmakers are considering bills this spring that would give insurance companies a better way to contribute to Step Up For Students Scholarships and reduce the application paperwork for families that already qualify for other state assistance.

The bills, introduced as HB 453 by Rep. Will Weatherford and SB 1310 by Sen. Andy Gardiner, would add a second tax source for scholarship tax credits. Currently, corporations can receive a dollar-for-dollar credit for contributions of up to 75 percent of their state income tax liability. The bills would add the insurance premium tax to the mix. Many insurance companies currently don't qualify for the program because they pay the premium tax in lieu of the income tax.

"It's really just Business 101," says Doug Tuthill, president of the program. "It would help us diversify our base and open up the program to businesses that have wanted to contribute but haven't met the guidelines."

A second feature should streamline the scholarship process for families that already qualify for income-based state programs such as food stamps and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. Under the bills, families that have

been certified to receive benefits under such programs would no longer be required to prove their income separately for the Step Up Scholarships.

The Step Up program is currently providing scholarships to 23,300 students from low-income households throughout Florida, allowing them to attend one of 950 different private schools. In December, the state Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability reported that the program saved taxpayers \$39-million last year because the scholarships are roughly \$3,000 less than the per-student cost in traditional public schools. Neither bill would increase the current program cap of \$118-million or the current scholarship cap of \$3,950.

A third provision in the bills would help spread word of the program, now in its seventh year. School districts would be required, if asked by scholarship funding organizations, to notify families that qualify for the free and reduced lunch program that their students also are eligible for the scholarship. The scholarship organizations would pay for any extra expense the district incurred because of the notification.



Your Voice For Choice

Last year, more than 200 school choice supporters traveled to the Capitol and had their voices heard by state lawmakers. Families also sent their passionate pleas asking for support by emailing, mailing and calling their legislators.

As a result of your communication, the Legislature responded by increasing both the overall number and the individual amounts of the scholarships your children receive.

Join us this year as we make our voices

heard again.

Sign up to join us in Tallahassee for the second annual Blitz on April 14 and April 15 and stand up for your child's future. We also need your help again this year to write letters and make phone calls to convince Florida's lawmakers that your child's scholarship deserves their vote.

The Blitz takes place on two days in hopes of allowing more parents to attend, but you only need to sign up for one day. Private donations

will fund luxury buses that will be departing from locations throughout the state for interested parents and schools. Meals will also be provided while you are with us in Tallahassee.

To sign up for this remarkable event, please visit www.stepupforstudents.com and click on "Sign Up For The Blitz."

If you would like more information on how to contact your Senator or House Representative, please email Michael Benjamin at mbenjamin@face.org

INSIDE: Find out if your kids qualify for free summer meals



Mark Your Calendars with Renewal Deadlines:

Children First Florida (CFF)

The deadline for renewing scholarship families is April 30, 2009. For more information, please call (866) 469-7445 or go online to www.scholarshipfunding.org for an application. You can also email info@scholarshipfunding.org with any questions.

Florida P.R.I.D.E:

The renewal deadline is May 1, 2009. For more information, please call (866) 590-5364 or go online to www.floridapride.org for an application. If you have a specific question about an application that has already been submitted, please contact the application processing company, PSAS, at (800) 664-1531.

Application Tips:

- ➔ Complete, sign and mail application with all supporting documentation and money order for processing
- ➔ Provide income documentation for all household members
- ➔ Ensure all children are documented as dependents on IRS Form 1040 or provide proof of their residence
- ➔ Do not mail with signature required for receipt
- ➔ Be sure to review the checklist and include all documents the first time to avoid going on "hold"

 This is the official newsletter for Step Up For Students, published four times a year.

About Step Up For Students: Our mission is to help alleviate the enormous educational challenges faced by children from low-income and working class families. The scholarships allow these students to consider a private school or an out-of-district public school that may better suit their individual needs. This choice is not based on whether the public school is judged as succeeding or failing. Rather, it recognizes that different children learn in different ways and that our collective struggle is to help the students who often are at the greatest disadvantage in modern education.

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President: **Doug Tuthill**
Chief Financial Officer: **Kim Dyson**
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Director of Community Outreach: **Michael Benjamin**
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Communications Specialist: **Jillian Metz**
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Introducing...

The School Development Network

Step Up For Students is expanding its services to schools with the addition of a school development network.

The network aims to assist Florida private schools developing their institutions to best serve the Step Up For Students Scholarship recipients.

"Not only do we believe in choice for low-income parents, but we support a better choice," said Doug Tuthill, the executive director of the school development network and president of the Florida School Choice Fund. "We want to promise a high-quality learning environment for our students, parents and teachers."

The network will assist schools in working with their local public school district to receive federal funding for reading, mathematics and professional development. The network also aims to develop schools' marketing operations to better recruit students. Grant writing assistance for grants, including technological assistance grants, which assist schools in getting much-needed computers, will also be provided.

Ciao! Au revoir! Adios! A Salute to Our Seniors

We are excited to congratulate more than 600 senior scholarship students who will be graduating this spring. On behalf of the scholarship staff at Step Up For Students, we thank you for your participation in the program and hope that your future holds many great opportunities.



If your path is leading you to college, we would like to inform you of a service that can help you locate financial assistance that is available.

FastWeb is the leading Internet scholarship search service that contains more than 1.3-million scholarships worth more than \$3-billion. The free service offers students help in choosing a college, paying for college and finding jobs and internships. By answering a questionnaire, the service will generate information on scholarships, colleges, internships, jobs and more. To find out more, visit FastWeb at www.FastWeb.com

Don't Let Our Kids Go Hungry This Summer

Are there children in your community who will go hungry this summer? Many of our kids rely on school lunch and breakfast during the school year. But what happens when school lets out?

Locally, the summer feeding program is operated by approved sponsors, which receive reimbursement from U.S. Department of Agriculture for meals served. Summer parks and recreation programs, summer camps, and summer bible schools are just some examples of potentially eligible sponsors.

If you would like to learn more about the program, please contact the Florida Department of Education, Food and Nutrition Management Staff by calling 1- 800- 504-6609.



Tampa school turns hope into action

The sign above the threshold uses bold letters, H.O.P.E., and the school that sits behind them is testament enough. Bible Truth Ministries Academy, begun in a converted upstairs apartment in the home of principal Suzette Dean, is now a polished grey stucco building on 22nd Street in east Tampa. Nine years after opening a classroom for eight neighborhood children who wanted help, Mrs. Dean runs a school for 67 eager African-American children.

"We're just blessed," Mrs. Dean will often say. "We're just blessed."

The academy, and the sanctuary and community center that sits in front of it, were built by husband Daniel with his own hands. The facilities already have become such a community fixture that most afternoons students from the public high school across the street stop by for study and tutoring and FCAT preparation and free time in the computer lab. On any given day, former Tampa Bay Buccaneer and All Sports Community Services director Tyrone Keys may be talking with young males about setting goals for college or current Buc players may be reading to young students. Teenagers and adults play on the outdoor basketball court or engage in the ongoing games of chess and checkers under

the stately trees. The rules are simple enough: no swearing, no fighting, no drugs, no pants below the waist, and show respect.

The school is the product of genuine sweat equity, along with an \$80,000 family bequest the couple used to buy land and building materials. The school spans from K to 12, and the tuition this year is \$3,763. Students are divided into multi-grade learning groups and taught with the Accelerated Christian Education curriculum, which is self-paced and has allowed some of the students to advance well beyond their grade levels. Mrs. Dean believes in regular evaluation and uses the Stanford Achievement Test to measure students' academic standing nationally. The only sport offered at the academy is chess, and the students have become so successful they often bring home trophies competing against students who are several years older.

Last June, the academy celebrated its first graduate. That young woman, Angel Nichole Lee, had attended since fourth grade and had made the climb from C's and D's to A's and B's. She headed off to Hillsborough Community College with ambitions of medical school. "Although you start out bad," she told students at her ceremony, "you can end up good."



Suzette Dean (right) stands among nine Step Up Scholarship students at Bible Truth Ministries Academy.

Donor Corner: EMBARQ

EMBARQ Corporation has emerged as a leader in the communication industry through the innovative products and services it offers consumer and business customers. Now, through its support of Step Up For Students, EMBARQ has extended its innovative approach in business to help improve the educational outcomes of Florida's children.

Headquartered in Overland Park, Kansas, EMBARQ offers a complete suite of communications services for consumer and business customers, including local and long distance voice, data, high speed Internet and entertainment services. The company also offers package deals with multiple communication products and services, making it



a one-stop shop for its customers. EMBARQ now operates in 18 states.

EMBARQ is committed to improving the quality of life for the local communities it serves, which is

why the company has joined Step Up For Students in providing educational options for Florida's economically disadvantaged youth. EMBARQ signed on as a corporate donor to the program in 2008 with a \$9-million contribution, providing scholarships for more than 2,200 low-income children to attend a K-12 school of choice.

"We are proud of our rich tradition of community support as a whole and education in particular," said Dean Kurtz, EMBARQ state executive for Florida. "We believe these areas of focus are an

important part of being a good corporate citizen."

In addition to its generous support of Step Up For Students, the company also supports other initiatives in K-12 and higher education that help our youth to become better students and leaders, including providing quality technology learning experiences for our future workforce. One example is the creation of the EMBARQ Technology & Innovation Centers for Boys & Girls Clubs in various markets throughout the nation. Through this program, EMBARQ has provided new computer hardware equipment, educational software and other innovative products and services, including high speed Internet, to the centers.

Step Up For Students commends EMBARQ for its dedication to our youth.