Small but prideful advancements

The news is so full of tragedies and political conflict, it is easy to overlook the small events that more accurately reveal the strength of our community. Let us share a few:

The other day businessman John Kirtley donated $100,000 to two Hillsborough single-gender middle schools. The contribution will be matched by the Walton Family Foundation, with the $200,000 going for transportation to field trips and other necessities for the schools, which have a high number of low-income students.

Kirtley has long been a champion of providing education opportunities for disadvantaged students. He started Step-Up for Students, which provides private school vouchers to low-income students.

The scholarships are funded by the Florida Tax Credit Scholarships, a program allowing companies to receive a tax credit for contributions to the scholarship funds, so state dollars are not directly used for the vouchers.

Teachers unions often see such programs as a threat to public schools, but Kirtley rightly believes poor kids should have more educational opportunities. For most children, public school is the best choice. But some students do better in private schools, which may offer more structure and personal attention. Wealthy children have that choice; why shouldn’t poor ones?

As his latest generous act shows, Kirtley wants what is best for students, whether in private or public schools. He is an education champion who backs his words with deeds — and dollars.

Another development of note is occurring at the University of South Florida, where Bulls football Coach Skip Holtz is doing more than building a winning team.

The USF football program had the largest academic improvement of any BCS conference program over the last two years.

No team came close to the Bulls’ 21.5-point increase on the Academic Progress Rate, which is reported by the NCAA. As the Tribune’s Adam Adkins reports, USF ranked 59th out of 66 BCS teams last year and this year moved up to 30.

Not all that progress occurred under Holtz, who is preparing for his second regular season here, but his staff has placed special emphasis on academics, and he promises more improvement. At a recent function he talked proudly of how players now come to practice bragging about test scores.

And Hillsborough Supervisor of Elections Earl Lennard’s office has found a nice way to serve the public and help nonprofits.

With the Adopt-A-Precinct program, adult volunteers with charitable groups are trained to work in a variety of positions on Election Day. The hourly pay that would normally go to precinct workers goes to the civic organization.

Craig Latimer, chief of staff for the office, says Boy Scout Troop 5 earned $1,100 during the recent city election, when 12 organizations and 150 individuals participated in Adopt-A-Precinct.

The office is trying to get the word out to more organizations so they can participate in future elections. (Contact Ida Booth at 813-276-2421 or email her at ibooth@hcsoe.org for more information.)

It’s a small thing, but evidence of a public agency trying to serve the community as effectively as possible.

While these events may be of modest import, they remind us amid the din of dreary news that an awful lot of people quietly are doing the right thing every day.