

Donations fund scholarships for low income students

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BRANDON - A Tampa company that has contributed millions toward scholarships for under-privileged youth got to meet some of the children recently during a recycling celebration at New Jerusalem Christian School.

One, in particular, Step Up for Students scholarship recipient Doris Abar, 13, spoke eloquently before her peers and representatives of JJ Taylor Distributing, about how the scholarship has stabilized her otherwise chaotic life.

Her single mom has struggled to provide food and keep a roof over their heads, she told the audience. They have moved often.

Getting the scholarship through Step Up has added stability to her life, where otherwise, she would be regularly switching schools, she said.

Step Up For Students, based in Tampa, is part of the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship program that allows businesses to divert a portion of their state excise tax to fund the program. The Tampa beer distributor, JJ Taylor, involved in the program for three years, has donated \$60 million for scholarships getting a dollar-for-dollar state tax credit.

"There are things our county needs to be passionate about and education is one of them," said JJ Taylor President Jay Martin. "Our CFO, Hank DesPlaines, found out about this program and reached out and was just very impressed by it."

Families whose children receive these scholarships have an average household income of \$25,000 for a family of four, said Step Up Chairman John Kirtley. Sixty percent of the kids are from single-parent homes, 40 percent are African-American and 35 percent are Hispanic.

"The purpose of this program is to empower low income families to find the best educational environment for their children," Kirtley said. "A public school might not be the right fit for that child."

Cheryl Valladeres of Seffner, is raising her daughter's two children, both of whom have learning disabilities and some physical disabilities. "They are both on medication due to their mom's drug abuse" and one of them was quite ill for about six years, Valladeres said.

Public school just wasn't working for them, she said. Despite their academic abilities, the schools wanted to keep them in special education classrooms and she didn't want that. She qualified for and received Florida Tax Credit Scholarships for both of her grandsons.

"They are very good students. They are doing very well," said Valladeres, whose daughter-in-law, Cheryl Valladeres is principal at New Jerusalem.

Florida State House Speaker Will Weatherford, R-Wesley Chapel, was one of nine children, himself, who was home-schooled and attended both public and private school. He spoke during the event last week, praising the state program.

"The whole point of Step Up is so that parents will have a choice" about where to send their children to school, Weatherford said. "One of my big priorities is to give parents that choice."

There are about 15 schools in Hillsborough County, east of Interstate 75, participating in this program.

To date, nearly 51,000 students have used the scholarship since the program was approved by the state legislature in 2001. This year, the maximum scholarship is \$4,335 and parents make up any difference in tuition, Kirtley said. The scholarship is expected to increase to \$6,000 by 2015, to meet the 80 percent per-student operational formula for public schools.

While they had visitors during the scholarship showcase, the students at New Jerusalem showed off what they are learning about recycling and sustainable forms of energy. Abar won an essay contest on alternative forms of energy and the school's first-graders won a prize for collecting the most recyclables. Many of the students also created posters about recycling and sustainability.

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