Republic National Distributing Company donates $55 million for scholarships

By PAUL SOOST

Republic National Distributing Company (RNDC), the nation’s second largest premium wine and spirits distributor, announced Nov. 14 a $55 million donation to Step Up For Students to provide scholarships for financially disadvantaged children in Florida.

The donation was announced at Cristo Rey Tampa High School, a Catholic college-preparatory school and work study program for lower-income children in the Tampa Bay area. Of the 88 students attending Cristo Rey Tampa High School, 76 of them are recipients of the Step Up For Students scholarship.

RNDC State Executive Vice President Ron Barcena presented Step Up For Students President Doug Tuthill with an oversized check representing the company’s $55 million contribution for the 2016-17 school year. The company’s donation, more than triple the amount of previous years, will fund more than 9,600 K-12 scholarships. The donation marks the fifth consecutive year that RNDC has partnered with Step Up, bringing its total to $115 million since 2012.

“As part of our commitment to social responsibility, we are focused on making positive differences that enrich the spirit and well-being of those in the communities we serve,” said Barcena. “We’re thrilled that this contribution will provide educational choices for lower-income Florida families, helping them set their children up for a successful future.”

State Sen. Darryl Rouson attended the event at Cristo Rey to thank Republic National Distributing Company for supporting the community and lower-income students.

“Having received a private school education myself, I’m proud to see so many deserving students receiving the same learning opportunity, thanks to the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program and to corporate donors like Republic National Distributing Company,” he said.

Rouson recalled a time as a boy he attended camp on the same grounds as Cristo Rey, and that he, too, went to Catholic school, which led him to his successful career as a lawyer and a legislator.

“Saints walk among us daily, and they come in the form of companies like Republic National Distributing Company and provide opportunities for children who need it,” Rouson said. Steven Faison is one such student. The ninth-grader at Cristo Rey told the small crowd of guests at his school that while he had been attending a public magnet school, the overcrowding was troublesome for him. But private school seemed financially out of reach until he and his family learned about Cristo Rey and the scholarships through Step Up For Students.

“Education is very important to my family,” he said, “I plan to be the first in my family to attend and graduate from college.”

Step Up helps manage the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program, which provides scholarships to qualified lower-income K-12 schoolchildren throughout Florida. The program allows recipients to choose between a scholarship to help with private school tuition and fees, or a transportation scholarship to attend an out-of-district public school.

“We are truly grateful for the generosity and support of Republic National Distributing Company. The positive impact their contribution will have on more than 9,600 children this year alone is truly remarkable,” said Tuthill. “RNDC is a great partner, and on behalf of our families, we thank them for their continued support.”

During the 2016-17 school year, Step Up For Students is serving more than 95,000 students throughout Florida with tuition scholarships valued at up to $5,886 per student. More than 1,600 private schools participate in the scholarship program statewide.

Step Up public relations and social media manager Lisa A. Davis contributed to this report.
DONOR UPDATE

Our donors have made it possible for Step Up For Students to deliver scholarships to more than 95,000 underprivileged children for the 2016-17 school year. The 2016 cap opened in January at $559 million - a 25 percent increase over the 2015 cap. Through November 30, Step Up is setting its sights on meeting goal with less than $3 million to go. Step Up’s heartfelt thanks goes to these companies that have pledged toward the 2016 goal:

2016 Donor List
- 3M Company
- 7-Eleven, Inc.
- ABC Fine Wine and Spirits, Inc.
- Allegiant Travel Company
- Allstate Insurance Company
- American Coastal Insurance Company
- American Integrity Insurance Company
- American Strategic Insurance
- American Traditions Insurance Company
- Amerisure Insurance
- Anchor Property & Casualty Insurance Company
- Ark Royal Insurance Company
- Ascendant Commercial Insurance, Inc.
- Auto Club Insurance Company of Florida
- AutoNation, Inc.
- Avatar Property & Casualty Insurance Co.
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- Babcock & Wilcox Enterprises
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- CenterState Bank of Florida, NA
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- Champion Brands, Inc.
- Chubb
- Chigna Health and Life Insurance Company
- Circle K Stores
- Citizens First Bank
- Coach, Inc. & Subsidiaries
- Cone Distributing
- Continental National Bank
- Covanta
- Crowley Maritime Corporation
- Cypress Property & Casualty Insurance Company
- Dairyland Auto and Cycle Insurance
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- Dearborn National Life Insurance Company
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- Double Eagle Distributing
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- Duke Energy
- Eagle Brands Sales
- Energy Insurance Mutual
- Euler Hermes North America Insurance Company
- EverBank
- Express Scripts
- Petro-Canada America Lubricants Inc.
- Philadelphia Insurance Companies
- PNC Foundation
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- Raymond James
- Read Connigo, sponsored by Infinity Auto Insurance
- Reliance Standard Life Insurance Company
- Republic National Distributing Company, LLC
- Rockwell Collins
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- S.R. Perrott, Inc.
- Sabadell United Bank
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- Safety National Casualty Corporation
- Sagicor Life Insurance Company
- Saxum Business Systems, Inc.
- Schweitzer-Mauduit International Inc.
- Seaside Engineering & Surveying, LLC
- SeaVac, Inc. / Lake Ridge Winery & Vineyards and San Sebastian Winery
- Security First Insurance Company
- Security Mutual Life Insurance
- Senior Health Insurance Company of Pennsylvania
- Smith & Nephew
- Southern Eagle Distributing, Inc.
- Southern Glazer’s Wine and Spirits
- St. Johns Insurance Company, Inc.
- Stephens Distributing Co.
- Summit Bank NA
- Synovus Bank
- Sysco Central Florida, Inc.
- Sysco Jacksonville, Inc.
- Sysco West Coast Florida, Inc.
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- The Bank of Tampa
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- The GEO Group, Inc.
- The Hartford Financial Services Group, Inc.
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- The Main Street America Group
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- Tractor Supply Company
- Tri-Eagle Sales
- U.S. Bank National Association
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- Universal Health Services, Inc.
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- Urban Outfitters, Anthropologie, and Free People
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- Value Pawn & EZCORP Company
- Vector Group Ltd.
- Vera Bradley
- W.S. Farlow & Company
- Walter Investment Management Corp
- Waste Management
- Wayne Densch, Inc.
- Westcor Land Title Insurance Company
- Westfield Insurance
- Wight National Food Insurance Company
- WynneVacation Ownership
- Zeno Office Solutions
- Zoll Medical Corporation

Companies: Claim your tax credit
If your company has enrolled in the Step Up For Students Scholarship Program this year and has not yet notified us, please let us know so that we can extend our gratitude to you and assist your company with the necessary steps to receive your tax credits, including the required certificate of contribution for your tax returns. If your company has not yet notified us of your pledge, please do so by emailing Tim Bodamer at tlbodamer@suis.org
Meet Jensen Howell: future astrophysicist

By GEOFF FOX

Jensen Howell had just returned from school one fall day and there was genuine joy in his voice.

Yes, he had homework to do, but he didn’t seem to mind.

In fact, his teacher would tell you the 13-year-old seventh-grader at Summit Christian School in Fort Myers is happiest when he is being challenged academically.

That’s good, because he wants to be an astrophysicist. As a young boy in Ireland, he was amazed by the stars he could see through his telescope, and his interest in the universe has increased with age.

Jensen said he feels fortunate to attend a school where his interests are encouraged and engaged.

“School went great today. We did pretty much normal stuff, but the girls had a volleyball tournament and then we all played volleyball together,” Jensen said. “It was also this other kids birthday, and he wanted to play dodge ball, so we played ultimate dodge ball. That’s when there are three balls and it’s everyone for themselves.”

The fifth of Kyle Jorgensen’s seven children, Jensen – pronounced YEN-sen – has been at Summit Christian since the fifth grade. He had started school in his native Ireland, but his family moved after he finished kindergarten.

The move was precipitated by misfortune. In Ireland, the family lived comfortably. Jensen and his siblings attended a tiny Catholic school with small class sizes and lots of individual attention from teachers. And the school had a picturesque setting with a view of the North Atlantic Ocean.

The family was involved in their small community when Jorgensen’s marriage began to unravel.

During the divorce process, Jorgensen said she realized her family, including older sons Erik and Jorgen, younger son Finn and daughter Susanna, needed space to heal. The family first moved to Costa Rica to be near Jorgensen’s sister. In 2009, the family moved to Fort Myers to be closer to her parents.

For a time, Jorgensen homeschooled her children in Fort Myers, but money was extremely tight and she had to find work.

She wanted to send her children to a private Christian school like the one in Ireland, but she knew the cost would be too much.

Jorgensen’s children went to public school in Fort Myers for a while, but it didn’t seem like a good fit for any of them. The curriculum was based heavily on book work, and there was little physical activity during the day, something that Jensen, who likes to wrestle, play football and rollerblade, found frustrating.

Eventually, a local youth pastor told Jensen about the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program managed by Step Up For Students. Jorgensen applied for Jensen and his siblings, and they were all accepted.

“Jorgen applied for Jensen and his siblings, and they were all accepted. It was amazing,” Jensen said. “I never ever in a million years thought my kids could go to private school. I thought it was out of the question. I love Summit. It’s a very special school. It reminds me a lot of the school in Ireland. It’s bigger, but it has the same heart.”

Erik Howell, 18, has since graduated from Evangelical Christian School in Fort Myers and now attends Florida Southwestern State College; Jorgen, 16, now attends Gateway Military Academy in Bonifay. Finn, 10, is a fifth-grader at Summit Christian; and Susanna, 8, is a third-grader there.

Kyle Mast has been Jensen’s teacher since fifth grade. He said he is impressed by Jensen’s critical thinking skills and enthusiasm for learning. While Jensen occasionally struggles with grammar, he is a voracious reader and enjoys spending his free time learning about athletics.

“Jensen is a student who wants to be challenged,” Mast said. “He demonstrates a lot of leadership qualities through his work. Sometimes he gets a little frustrated, but it’s just because he wants to continue to be challenged.”

It is Jensen’s work ethic, enthusiasm and natural curiosity that make Mast believe he will be successful in whichever field he chooses.

“He can probably do whatever he wants,” Mast said. “The biggest thing is if he will invest in his own education and is willing to do the work to get there.”

Jensen seems to be on the right path, and Jorgensen couldn’t be happier about her children’s education.

“One of my favorite things about where we live is that school,” she said. “My kids are just thriving here. With Summit, it’s not just the Christian education, but they’re also academically, it’s really good and they keep them challenged with sports, but spiritual life and character are also hugely important at that school.”

“Actually they do, they like to do it. I’ve never seen it before. They like going to school. They actually skip to school; it’s strange.

“Step Up For Students helped me realize there are other options out there. Step Up enlarges your vision for your children. Once you begin to get scholarships, it just opens up this realm for their future.”

UnitedHealthcare funding 2,307 scholarships in 2016-17

By PAUL SOOST

UnitedHealthcare hosted a celebration on Oct. 4 at Summit Christian School in Fort Myers to feed the hungry minds and bodies of about 40 middle school students in celebration of its partnership with Step Up For Students.

Nicholas Zaffiris, CEO of UnitedHealthcare South Florida, announced UnitedHealthcare’s 2016 contribution of $14 million, which will fund K-12 scholarships for more than 2,300 financially disadvantaged schoolchildren throughout Florida.

This is UnitedHealthcare’s seventh year contributing to Step Up For Students, bringing the company’s total contribution to $73 million since 2009.

“UnitedHealthcare is honored to partner with Step Up For Students to support scholarships that ensure more Florida students have access to quality education,” Zaffiris said. “We value the role schools can play in helping students understand the importance of good health as they evolve to become productive adults.”

During the event at Summit Christian School, where nearly 25 percent of the students are on scholarship, event participants traded in their pencils and grabbed a spatula as they were led by Melissa McCartney, local culinary instructor and owner of Method Teaching Kitchen. McCartney showed seventh- and eighth-graders how to prepare tasty after-school snacks that can satisfy hunger and give them energy for extracurricular activities and homework time.

The program was designed to show the connections among nutrition, physical fitness and learning.

“The Step Up For Students Scholarship Program is positively shaping the future of our state’s children, and we could not do this important work without donors like UnitedHealthcare,” said Doug Tuthill, Step Up For Students president. “We are grateful for its support and generosity, and for the impact that UnitedHealthcare is making in our community.”

Local chef and culinary instructor Melissa McCartney (back row third from left) led the seventh and eighth grade classes in making healthy after-school snacks as part of a healthy lifestyle presentation by UnitedHealthcare at Summit Christian School. Presenting the healthy snacks are (front row left to right) Step Up scholars Jensen Howell, Regina Pina, Ethan Godoy, (back row left to right) Step Up President Doug Tuthill, UnitedHealthcare CEO Nicholas Zaffiris, McCartney, Summit Christian School Principal Todd Zyistra, and Step Up scholars Manny Pina and Joseph Martinez.
Proud to see scholarships deliver results

WITH ELLIOT B. MAISEL
Chairman and CEO of Gulf Distributing

Every day when my employees and I come to work, we pass through the lobby of our headquarters and see artwork produced by a special group of students. They are recipients of the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, which has been helping economically disadvantaged schoolchildren for 15 years.

The art reminds us that our contributions to this innovative program are opening doors of opportunity for Florida’s most disadvantaged children. To date, we have donated $7.3 million, enough to fund 2,013 scholarships.

The results couldn’t be more gratifying, and we encourage other companies to see if the program is a good fit for them.

Frankly, I can’t think of a reason why it wouldn’t be. The goal is that worthy. Participation is that easy.

This year, the scholarship is serving more than 95,000 students in nearly 1,700 schools. Their average family income is $24,000 a year. More than half come from single-parent homes. Years of test data show most of them struggled in their prior schools, but now, in their new schools, they are making steady gains.

Their progress makes us all stronger.

Yet without the scholarships, their parents could not have accessed these options. Helping students find a path to success is one of the most important things any of us can do. I say this not only as a CEO who wants my company to do its share building a brighter future for our state and our country, but as the proud son of two public school educators.

The scholarship helps make this happen, and I’m almost embarrassed to say how easy it is for the corporate community to play a role. If your company has a tax liability in Florida in one of five areas, it can earn dollar-for-dollar tax credits in return for contributions to scholarship funding organizations. It takes very little paperwork. The cost is nil. And the program is exceptionally well run to boot.

Step Up For Students, Florida’s premier scholarship organization, has administered the program since the beginning, and its experience shows. The nonprofit earned a perfect score from Charity Navigator this year, and a platinum rating from GuideStar. Its credibility should give companies even more confidence that the scholarship is accomplishing the mission that thoughtful lawmakers envisioned for it 15 years ago.

Like so many other donors, Goldring Gulf Distributing didn’t give to the scholarship program because we wanted to make ourselves feel good. We wanted to make a positive difference in our community. But there is a side benefit I didn’t foresee: the pride that comes from being part of a program that is truly delivering as promised.

To learn more visit: www.FLTaxCredit.org.

About Step Up For Students:
Step Up For Students provides legislatively authorized K-12 scholarships and related support to give economically disadvantaged families the freedom to choose the best learning options for their children.

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