



# -STEP UP FOR STUDENTS- NEWSLETTER

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VOLUME 1



## Southern Wine & Spirits of America celebrates \$100 million commitment to Step Up For Students

### Donor hosts statewide book drive during National Literacy Month

BY PAUL SOOST

 Southern Wine & Spirits of America, Inc. (Southern), the nation's leading wine and spirits distributor, celebrated its \$100 million tax redirection commitment to the Step Up For Students Scholarship Program, on Nov. 30 for the 2015-16 school year with a statewide book drive hosted by its employees. This is Southern's sixth year participating in the program, bringing the company's total contribution to \$190 million since 2011.

"At Southern, we know that education is invaluable, and that a quality education offers a world of possibilities," said Southern CEO Wayne E. Chaplin. "As a leader in our industry and in our local community, we take great pride in leading the way to support Step Up For Students, and in providing thousands of deserving Florida children with scholarships for the 2015-16 school year."

In recognition of the scholarship contribution, Southern's employee-driven volunteer group, the VolunCheers, held a statewide book drive during National Literacy Month in September. The VolunCheers program was created to encourage Southern's employees to donate their time, resources and talent in support of local nonprofit organizations, schools and community-based programs.

The books were presented to schools in five Florida cities – Miami, Orlando, Tampa, Lakeland and Jacksonville – and included Southern VolunCheers in each city visiting local classrooms to read to the students.



**Southern Wine's historic \$100 million contribution to the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program. The donation will help Step Up For Students fund 17,000 scholarships for children from low-income families. The presentation took place at PenTab Academy in Miami Gardens, where Southern Wine also donated more than 500 books.**

"Southern Wine & Spirits continues to demonstrate their commitment to our Florida communities through their incredible generosity and care for Florida students. With this remarkable donation, thousands upon thousands of scholarships will be awarded to Florida students," said Doug Tuthill, president of Step Up For Students. "We are grateful for our partnership with Southern and, along with our Step Up families, are deeply appreciative of their tremendous support in creating brighter futures for these students and their families."

Step Up For Students helps administer the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program, which provides scholarships to

qualified low-income families throughout Florida. Scholarships are funded by corporations that receive a dollar-for-dollar tax credit for their contributions. The program allows recipients to choose either a scholarship to help with private school tuition and fees or a transportation scholarship to assist with transportation costs to an out-of-district public school.

During the 2015-16 school year, Step Up For Students has more than 78,000 scholars throughout Florida, with more than 17,000 who will directly benefit from Southern's \$100 million contribution. In Miami-Dade County alone this school year, more than 380 schools participate in the program with more than 20,000 students benefiting.

## Step Up For Students launches regional meetings; recognizes top scholars, educators and parents

BY LISA A. DAVIS

 One by one their names were called, and nearly two dozen Step Up For Students scholars from St. Petersburg to Bradenton grinned from ear to ear as they walked in front of a packed house to accept their Scholars of Excellence Award medals.

Like Zharia Stephens, a sixth-grade tax-credit scholar at Mt. Moriah Christian Fundamental Academy in St. Petersburg. She has been on honor roll all year, participates in many activities and wants to become a lawyer.

"These students are working so hard and many have come such a long way since using one of our scholarships. We are so proud of all of them and need to applaud them publicly," Carol Thomas, vice president of Step Up's Office for Student Learning, said after the event.

The awards ceremony Feb. 1 at the Cathedral of St. Jude honored students who made significant academic strides since receiving their scholarships and was the kickoff to this year's series of regional meeting tours held by Step Up For Students. The annual event helps provide participants and supporters with timely updates on the nearly 15-year-old Florida Tax Credit Scholarship for low-income families and the Gardiner Scholarship



**Donors attending the awards ceremony at St. Jude on Feb. 1 set up a reception line so they could personally congratulate each of the scholars. Cheryl Jones from Old Republic National Title Insurance Company congratulates a Scholar of Excellence as Roberta Phillips looks on.**

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# DONOR UPDATE

After filling the 2015-16 program cap of \$447 million in just seven months, Step Up For Students is grateful to receive enthusiastic support toward the 2016-17 goal of \$559 million. Many companies have reserved their 2016-17 tax credits. As of February 15, tax-credit reservations to Step Up For Students totaled \$135 million. These commitments accentuate the corporate community's desire to provide a personalized education to Florida's underprivileged students.

It is with grateful appreciation that Step Up For Students recognizes corporations that have demonstrated a new or renewed commitment to Step Up (Jan. 1 – Feb. 15).

## 2015 Donors

- Sonic, America's Drive-In
- The Guardian Life Insurance Company of America

## 2016 Donors

- Ace American Insurance Company and Affiliates
- Axiom Bank
- BAC Florida Bank
- Brown & Brown, Inc.
- Centric Group, LLC
- Covanta
- Dairyland Auto Insurance
- Daytona Beverages, LLC
- Dick's Sporting Goods
- Euler Hermes North America Insurance Company
- FCCI
- FineMark National Bank & Trust
- Florida Distributing Company
- Florida Public Utilities Company
- Gap, Inc.

- Gold Coast Beverage, LLC
- Humana Inc.
- IBERIABANK
- Installed Building Products
- Johnson Brothers Liquor Co. of Florida, Inc.
- Parker Hannifin Corporation
- ProAssurance
- Republic National Distributing Company, LLC
- Rosen Hotels & Resorts
- RPD Management DBA Intuition Ale Works
- Safepoint Insurance Company
- Senior Health Insurance Company of Pennsylvania
- The Bank of Tampa
- The Container Store
- The Hartford Financial Services Group, Inc.
- The Lewis Bear Company
- Uretek Holdings, Inc.
- Value Pawn an EZCORP Company
- Waste Management
- Westcor Land Title Insurance Company
- Westfield Insurance

## 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 taking 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 Debbie Woerner at [dwoerner@sufs.org](mailto:dwoerner@sufs.org).

## STEP UP AT-A-GLANCE

How does our program work for companies that partner with Step Up?

A few key points of interest:

- Dollar-for-dollar tax credit for contributions
- Four-star ranking by Charity Navigator for nine separate fiscal years
- Five eligible taxes: Alcoholic Beverage Excise, Corporate Income, Insurance Premium, Direct Pay Sales & Use (Self-Accrual), and Oil & Gas Production
- 97 cents of every tax-credited contribution directly funds scholarships for K-12 low-income children
- 78,000 low-income children are being served in the 2015-16 school year

Visit [www.taxcredit.sufs.org](http://www.taxcredit.sufs.org) to learn more about how your company can make a tax-credited contribution.



# DONOR CORNER



Doug Tuthill, left, David Morgan and Step Up For Students scholars celebrated Circle K's donation at a Step Up For Students Scholars of Excellence Awards ceremony at the Cathedral of St. Jude recently in St. Petersburg.

## BY LISA A. DAVIS



With its recent donation of \$2 million for scholarships, Circle K, part of Alimentation Couche-Tard, is one of Step Up For Students' newest corporate partners.

Couche-Tard is the leader in the Canadian convenience store industry.

In the United States, it is the largest independent convenience store operator in terms of number of company-operated stores with over 8,000 convenience stores throughout North America and covering 41 states in the U.S. In addition, about 4,700 stores are operated by independent operators under the Circle K banner in 14 other countries.

"Circle K Florida always looks for those organizations that are able to make a difference in the communities where we operate," said David Morgan, vice president of Circle K's Florida division. "We want our contributions to have a positive impact directly in our local neighborhoods. Supporting causes that impact our youth through education is a very worthy way for Circle K to give back."

Circle K's donation will fund about 350 K-12 income-based scholarships, so financially disadvantaged children can attend the school that best meets their learning needs. Corporations that donate to the scholarship program receive a dollar-for-dollar tax credit for their contributions. About 78,000 students are using the scholarship to attend the school of their choice this year.

"Circle K is thrilled to help hundreds of Florida students through our participation in this program, and we are proud of that," Morgan said. "Through our support, more Florida children will find success in their educational experience."

"We are so grateful to bring on Circle K as a partner," said Step Up President Doug Tuthill. "Each year our fundraising cap grows and, thankfully, with the help of our longtime donors and new partners like Circle K, we can continue serving more students across Florida."

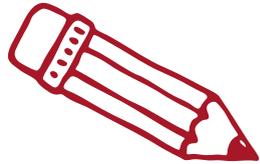
Known for its red K emblazoned in a white circle logo, good service, great product variety and the popular Polar Pop cups, Circle K is no stranger to philanthropy.

"Circle K Florida will continue its relationship with the American Red Cross, another of our cause marketing partners," Morgan said. "The American Red Cross is an organization that proudly supports families and local communities within our markets."

It's that same value that makes Step Up such a good fit for Circle K.

"Opening up learning opportunities through the scholarship program and allowing disadvantaged families the freedom to choose the best learning options for their children is certainly a great way to ensure the future success of our youth," Morgan said. "Circle K Florida would hope that these opportunities provide the scholars the foundation to becoming our future business and civic leaders."





# SCHOOL SPOTLIGHT

## Lake City Christian Academy

BY TRAVIS PILLOW, *redefinED*

*Editor's note: This story originally appeared on the redefinED blog on Dec. 14, 2015. The blog is hosted by Step Up For Students and is an education blog dedicated to recasting the way we perceive public education.*

**W** One recent morning, Tana Norris walked into the small building that houses the makeshift dance studio at her North Florida private school.

"I hear there are some amazing dancers in here," she intoned.

"I'm a dancer!" Stephen, an 11th-grader, responded. He and some classmates launched into a routine set to the contemporary Christian sounds of MercyMe, twirling, tapping and finishing with a confident bow.

Stephen, it turns out, is more than a dancer. He's also a prize-winning Special Olympics athlete (his finishes in local competitions include second place in the broad jump and first place in bowling) and a testament to the approach Norris said has guided Lake City Christian Academy since she founded it more than 20 years ago: "If a child feels good about themselves, and feels safe, they can learn."

The nondenominational private school has found ways to cater to a diverse group of children, the majority of whom either have special needs or didn't quite fit in at other schools. Nearly half of its 194 students rely on McKay Scholarships, the state's voucher program



Tegan performs stretching exercises while riding Zoey.



Students tap dance at Lake City Christian Academy.

for special needs students. Others use tax-credit scholarships for low-income students or the state's newest option, Gardiner Scholarships, formerly known as Personal Learning Scholarship Accounts. Step Up For Student helps administer the latter two programs.

Crystal Hair, the school's dance instructor, said movement and music can have benefits for all kinds of students. For some, dance can even help with reading instruction.

"It's operating their whole brain," she said. "It's amazing to see how much dance helps in their academics."

Norris graduated from the University of Florida and began her career teaching in public schools. She quickly grew frustrated. The classes were too large and the rules too burdensome for her to give students the individual attention she felt they needed. She took a pay cut and started teaching at a small private school for \$150 a week.

She founded Lake City Christian in 1994, seeing a need for a private school that wasn't affiliated with a single church. She set out to meet the needs of students she struggled to accommodate in public school — from those with special needs to those who are academically gifted. Dance helped for some. Others needed art lessons or auto-mechanics classes or college courses while they were still in high school. Some young children could learn responsibility and pattern recognition by caring for the baby pigs, goats and tortoises the school keeps on its campus.

Others, like a first-grader named Tegan, found solace on the back of a horse.

"Horses make very good counselors," said Norris, who's also a certified riding instructor. The rhythm of their gait is similar to humans'. Riding can help children with under-developed muscles. If a child is having a seizure, a horse can detect it before adult humans nearby.

Tegan suffered a stroke before she was born, which has inhibited the growth of her muscles and her use of language. Zoey, one of the school's therapy horses, is teaching her to exercise both her body and her voice. She's learning to shout commands and perform stretches in the saddle.

Norris said Tegan, in her first year at the school, has made huge strides in just a few months.

"Before she was nonverbal," she said. "She didn't really participate. And now, she wants to participate in everything."

Other students face more mundane challenges. For 12th-grader Katie Cutford, it was math anxiety. Earlier in her academic career, she left the school and bounced among other options, including home schooling, before returning to Lake City Christian during high school, where she got the extra help she needed in the subject that challenged her the most.

"It just wasn't working for me," she said. "When I came back, I realized what I had. My teachers were willing to stay after school with me."

Now, she's in dual-enrollment courses at Florida Gateway College. She's cleared the state's college-readiness tests. She signed up for the school's peer-counseling program, which lets her work one-on-one with other students at the school. Through that experience, she's discovered a potential career path.

"I feel like it's preparing me to be a teacher even before I go to college," she said.



# STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

## Meet Katie Cutford

BY SHERRI ACKERMAN



When Katie Cutford attended her neighborhood district school in Lake City, classmates sometimes made fun of her thick glasses and fainting spells.

Katie has juvenile glaucoma and POTS (Postural Tachycardia Syndrome), a heart condition that causes her to occasionally lose consciousness.

Her younger brother, Caleb Cutford, diagnosed with cerebral palsy and autism, also struggled at the school. That prompted their parents to look for other options.

Caleb was eligible for the McKay Scholarship, a state program that serves children with special needs. The financial assistance allowed the family to enroll him in Lake City Christian Academy, a private school that could provide the extra attention and services he needed.

Katie didn't qualify for the McKay, though, said her mom, Amanda Dudley. But she and her husband transferred Katie to the academy anyway and paid tuition on their own for three years.

Then the couple divorced and money became tight. Caleb remained at the academy on his scholarship, but Katie had to return to her neighborhood school in the eighth grade. Once again, she was bullied and her grades dropped.

"I was miserable," recalled the teen, who went on to try homeschooling.

Katie's grandmother oversaw lessons, but Katie fell behind academically, especially in math, and became withdrawn.

Dudley, a single mom who works as a medical assistant and receptionist at a local doctor's office, turned to Step Up For Students, a nonprofit that helps manage the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program.

Katie received the scholarship that helps low-income K-12 students with private-school tuition, and returned to Lake City Christian Academy her junior year. Today, she's a senior making mostly A's and getting the tutoring she needs in math.

She recently passed her college entrance exam and has signed up for two dual-enrollment courses at Florida Gateway College with plans to study education. Her dream is to complete her teaching degree at Vanderbilt University near where her aunt lives in Tennessee.

Caleb is a sophomore making progress in one of the academy's three exceptional student education (ESE) classes.

"They have been able to help us a lot," said Dudley, whose 5-year-old son, Harley Dudley, is a kindergartener on scholarship at the academy.

Lake City Christian Academy is a nondenominational private school serving about 194 students in prekindergarten through 12th grade. Of those, about 81 receive the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship through Step Up For Students. Another 24 participate in the Gardiner Scholarships, formerly the Personal Learning Scholarship Accounts program Step Up also helps oversee.



Katie Cutford

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for students

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## REGIONAL MEETINGS FROM PAGE 1

formerly known as the Personal Learning Scholarship Accounts, for children with certain special needs.

New to this year's program are special awards given to teachers and parents. At some locations, such as St. Jude, corporate donors were invited to join the awards ceremony and share the moment with the children they help.

Hugh Culbreath, a social studies teacher from Academy Prep, was among the first educators honored by Step Up at the regional meetings. He has taught at the school for about five years and puts his students first in all that he does, eating lunch with them, playing games and leading class trips.

"We are so excited to recognize outstanding teachers and parents and even grandparents this year," Thomas said. "As we teach in our Success Partners program, it takes all of these people contributing for the success of a child. They deserve to be recognized, too."

Step Up started the regional tours in 2014 as a way to give educators from partner schools a chance to learn more about the program and get questions answered directly from Step Up staff. This year, Step Up is holding about a dozen meetings, concluding Feb. 25 in Fort Myers.

"We found that it was extremely valuable in our partnership with our schools," Thomas said. "We're working for Florida's students together, so it's important we communicate regularly to foster the success of the program and, of course, the success of the scholars."

As the students' awards were presented at the St. Jude event, donors created a reception line to personally congratulate each of the scholars, and afterwards many families circulated to meet the donors to thank them directly.

"What a terrific event," said Dick Kelecy, chief operations officer of Uretex Holdings, Inc., a geotechnical construction company. "It was really rewarding to see all the children and educators who benefit so much from Step Up For Students' efforts. Having many of the parents come up on their own afterwards to personally thank the sponsors, one of which came to tears as she spoke about the benefits her children had received, was particularly rewarding."

Highlighting these students' achievements spotlighted the positive impact receiving a Step Up scholarship brings to each child.

"I continue to be awed by the results being achieved by Step Up," said Shaun Williams, CFO of Sagacor Life Insurance.

## STUDENT SPOTLIGHT FROM PAGE 3

The rest receive the McKay Scholarship or pay full tuition, which ranges from \$5,700 to \$8,000, depending on students' needs, plus additional fees for exceptional therapies and transportation.

The school is accredited by the Florida League of Christian Schools and uses the Bob Jones University curriculum. Student learning gains are measured annually by the Stanford 10 assessment test and others like STAR for reading and math.

Principal Tana Norris, a former public school teacher, founded the academy in 1994 to cater to students with special needs or those who don't fit in at other schools. The idea was to give teachers the freedom to teach and students the freedom to learn in a way that meets their needs.

"I wanted my teachers to be able to think outside the box, and my students to be able to use as many of their senses as they can," Norris said. "I like cooperative, hands-on learning."

In addition to core classes and electives like Spanish, drama, stage band, chorus and dance, the academy also offers gifted and college prep programs, mentoring, horse therapy and tutoring. Class sizes are kept small, with about 11 to 15 students per teacher.

That's a big plus for Katie.

"I can get one-on-one help from my teachers whenever I need it," she said. "I can go talk to the administrator and the pastor, and I know they can help."

Katie was one of those students who almost fell through the cracks, Norris said. Now she's a confident student participating in peer counseling, where she coaches fellow students, and has discovered her passion for teaching.

Getting a scholarship through Step Up and finding the right kind of school for her made all the difference, Katie said.

"There are many families like mine who can't afford private school," she said. "This program gives us a chance."

*Have you seen the scholarship in action, or do you have an idea for a story? Please contact Sherri Ackerman, public relations manager, at [sackerman@StepUpForStudents.org](mailto:sackerman@StepUpForStudents.org)*

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

### 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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