

Johnson County Education Growth Scholarship

Minnie Miller and Melanie Shepherd have been involved in the **Johnson County Education Growth Scholarship** since its inception. Johnson County is a small county located in the northeast corner of Tennessee. Minnie, then Superintendent of Schools, and Melanie, then with the Johnson County Workforce Development Partnership, were among a group of dedicated individuals who saw the need to help provide opportunities for the young people of Johnson County to pursue a post-secondary education. Those committed individuals, working with county government, wrote a grant to the Levi-Strauss Foundation who, along with local businesses, banks and individuals, provided the seed money for the Johnson County Education Growth Scholarship. Because part of the goal was to bring community college classes to Johnson County, Northeast State Community College was also a partner in the initial project. The Johnson County Education Growth Scholarship was established at East Tennessee Foundation and is a component fund of the Johnson County Community Foundation (JCCF), an affiliate of East Tennessee Foundation. “We wanted the scholarship to be endowed. We wanted it to provide scholarships in perpetuity,” comments Minnie. Both Minnie and Melanie continue to serve on the JCCF Board of Advisors.

Eligibility criteria for the scholarship was determined by the JCCF Board of Advisors, with guidance from ETF’s Terry Holley, Senior Vice President for Program and Regional Development. It was the goal of the JCCF that students from Johnson County, including adults, GED recipients as well as graduating high school seniors, who would not be able to attend college without financial assistance, have access to a post secondary education.

Minnie Miller shares how strongly she feels about the students of Johnson County having educational opportunities, “I was the first in my family to go to college and my parents did not finish high school. It was very important to them that I get an education.” She continues, “This scholarship not only provides financial assistance, it provides emotional support. It helps these students to believe in themselves.”

Melanie Shepherd talks about how satisfying it is, “seeing scholarship recipients come back and say that they were able to go to college because of this scholarship. It is wonderful to help another person go to school. You can see how the experience helps them to grow.” Melanie understands because she was not able to go to college directly after high school. She had to wait until later in life to pursue a post-secondary education, and sees the importance of adults being eligible for the Johnson County Education Growth Scholarship.

Minnie and Melanie share a story about two of the first scholarships awarded to two women, one with five children and one with three. One recipient planned to become a teacher and one planned to enter the health care field. A reception was held to award the scholarships and the recipients’ entire families attended, including parents, grandparents, children and spouses. “There were tears everywhere,” comments Minnie. “We realized how much even a small amount means. Just as the initial grant from Levi-Strauss gave us the impetus we needed to continue to work on helping to provide access to higher education, the Johnson County Education Growth Scholarship also provides an impetus for the recipients to go after their dreams.” The number of applicants has steadily increased as the students of Johnson County see their peers receiving scholarships, going to college and pursuing their goals. In the words of one Johnson County Education Growth Scholarship recipient, “I highly appreciate the aid you have given to me. My future is abundant with opportunities which I would have never had before your generous donation to make my college experience possible....It gives me that butterfly feeling when I realize that there are still people out there who care enough to make dreams possible, and I thank you.”

The scholarship not only helps the recipients, it affects the community, whose members see the importance of providing educational opportunities, and continue to support the scholarship. Fund raisers including an annual Talent Show and Golf Tournament contribute to the scholarship fund.

Minnie and Melanie speak for themselves and the scholarship supporters when they say, “We get far more out of what we give than from what we receive.”