

Pine Castle announces final phase of comprehensive fundraising campaign and prepares for 70th anniversary in November



Pine Castle has announced the final phase of a comprehensive \$2.25 million fundraising campaign. With campus renovations nearly complete and a new curriculum-based learning program in place, the nonprofit now aims to become debt free by its 70th anniversary in November and plans to celebrate with a barbeque party open to the public.

Pine Castle embarked on this three-phase fundraising campaign in 2020 with former Florida U.S. House Representative Ander Crenshaw and retired JAXUSA Partnership President Jerry Mallot serving as co-chairs of the efforts. The first two phases were quiet ones, done during the height of the pandemic. The third phase to eliminate the agency's debt is a public one.

"We are excited to share all the great things that have been happening within the Pine Castle community over the past 70 years, and particularly the past two," said Anthony Sutton, CFRE, Chief Development Officer.

HISTORY

Pine Castle helped pioneer the philosophy that every person has the right to live a full and productive life and that every person has the capacity to do so in a loving, caring environment. Pine Castle was the first organization in Northeast Florida, and remains one of the largest, to provide educational training and support services for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDDs) in a non-institutional setting. The Jacksonville campus was established in 1952 by 33 families who were encouraged by a local doctor to buy the land and hire a teacher.

More than a decade later, in 1965 when the school system began serving children with special needs, Pine Castle began serving adults. The organization remains committed to creating a better world for individuals with differences that include autism, Down syndrome, and cerebral palsy. The mission now is to empower this population through opportunities to learn, work, and connect. To accomplish this mission, Pine Castle needs help.

"We can't do this work alone. It has taken a village to get us to where we're at. We are grateful to all the donors who are making our current campaign a success," said Sutton.

PHASE 1 – CAMPUS RENOVATIONS

The first goal was to enhance the entire 70-year-old Pine Castle campus, renovating nearly every area to make it either a learning space or a working space. In

addition to updates on the main building and all classrooms, upgrades were completed on the kitchen and cafeteria as well, thanks to the lead gift from Dolores Barr Weaver.

The complete makeover ensures a safe and engaging atmosphere. It set the stage for the organization's most ambitious undertaking thus far, The Pine Castle Academy. "Thanks to generous donors for these projects, we have already raised \$1.8 million," Sutton said. These funds covered the first-phase renovations as well as the second phase of the campaign.



PHASE 2 – PINE CASTLE ACADEMY

The second phase of the campaign was to introduce a new curriculum-based learning program designed by a professional consultant specifically for Pine Castle's population. Launched in August, The Pine Castle Academy simulates a college-like environment that empowers adults with IDDs.

Following intake and assessment, each participant works with an advisor to personally choose one of the two academic Pathways to Possibilities that include mandatory basic courses, extra-curricular activities, and the opportunity to select a focused area of study that reflects the individual's interests and passions, similar to choosing a college major. This revitalized focus on education harkens back to Pine Castle's roots as a school.

The Pathway to Life Enrichment is a non-employment path that concentrates on life skills. The Pathway to Community Employment teaches pre-vocational skills

and helps participants find sustainable work in the surrounding community beyond the Pine Castle campus. Pine Castle also offers independent living opportunities, as the nonprofit operates five group homes at various locations in Northeast Florida.

"What we're most excited about with The Academy is that we will be able to measure progress and see how our adults are mastering skills as they go through each module of the program, pass quizzes, and learn to be more independent as they advance through the curriculum. We have seen over the years how much these individuals are capable of doing when we focus on their strengths and not their weaknesses," said Lori Ann Whittington, CEO of Pine Castle.

To establish the Pathways, donors have already given generously. But additional funds are needed in order to maintain The Academy far into the future and offer it to a wider number of eligible participants. Investing will give Pine Castle participants for decades to come the opportunities and support needed to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives.

PHASE 3 – DEBT FREE

"In this final public phase of the campaign, our goal is to make our nonprofit agency debt free for the first time in over a decade," said Whittington.

Pine Castle has been paying down a \$3 million construction debt that resulted from the financial crash of 2008. Earlier this year, the outstanding balance stood at \$1 million. But "Thanks to the lead gift from Lory Doolittle and generous gifts from other donors during the quiet phase of our campaign, we are now only about \$425,000 away from being debt free," Whittington said. Pine Castle is appealing to the public at large to help them with this remaining sum. Once the debt is repaid in full, the agency can reinvest the monthly principal and interest payments to fund existing and new programs for its participants.

Though Pine Castle serves more than 300 participants every weekday, there is still an overwhelming demand for their services in Northeast Florida. The state's Agency for Persons with Disabilities has a waiting list of 1,700. That number is expected to increase significantly in coming years as children with autism age out of the school system. Additional resources would allow Pine Castle to annually move more adults through the Pathways process of demonstrating skill mastery and graduating into jobs within the community. This, in turn, would allow Pine Castle to accept new

participants into the program each year, ideally 20-25, instead of serving the same adults year after year, thus reducing the waiting list. As the working force is ready to retire from employment in the community, they can return to Pine Castle in a seniors' group. A full life cycle of services is what Pine Castle offers, and it needs assistance from the Jacksonville community and beyond in order to do so.

THE FUTURE

Pine Castle has a vision where persons with IDDs achieve their potential for independence and that while the staff prepares these adults for success through the Pathways of Possibilities, the community readies to welcome and employ them in sectors such as landscape, maintenance, janitorial, manufacturing assembly, culinary, and even communications. "Pine Castle helped me live my dream of being on the radio. They focus on what I can do and not what I cannot do. They understand that this chair does not define me," said one program participant, Percy, a wheelchair user.

It is Pine Castle's hope that the public will join them on their journey of inclusion of individuals with IDDs into the community at large. For inclusion is an issue far greater than charity. It's a win-win solution for employers who need assistance and for individuals who need a chance. It's also a matter of civil rights.

PUBLIC BBQ INVITATION

In honor of its 70th anniversary Pine Castle will bring back the nostalgic BBQ fundraising event on Saturday, November 5 at its campus on Spring Park Road. "This barbeque used to be a big hit back in the '60s, '70s, and into the '80s. But it's going to be way more than just a barbeque this year," said Sutton. It's going to be a public celebration of all the agency has been working on over the past two years, a culmination of their efforts.

From 10 a.m. until 3 p.m. on that day, tour the newly renovated facility, enjoy carnival games, and socialize with participants and their families while savoring a barbeque or vegan meal. An additional activity Whittington hopes to include is a note-burning to celebrate the agency becoming debt free in the final phase of their fundraising campaign. She and the staff are confident that the public will come through generously to help Pine Castle pay off the debt and become truly sustainable for the next 70 years.



Pine Castle, celebrating 70 years of service to the disability community. Donate to the Pathways to Possibilities Campaign via check to Pine Castle, 4911 Spring Park Road, Jacksonville, Florida 32207. Donate online at www.PineCastle.org/70years. On that web page, purchase advance \$5 BBQ tickets. \$7 entry tickets will be available at the campus event on Saturday, November 5, 10-3. For further information, please call Anthony Sutton at (904) 733-2650 extension 282.