

History of the Burns Science & Technology Charter School

In June of 2008, Volusia County School Board closed W. F. Burns Elementary School in Oak Hill as part of the “budget cuts.” This school was the “heart of the community,” which was first settled after the Civil War, as devastated families moved to this area to find hope, plant citrus groves, and survive using food sources from the rich natural lagoon.

The story of the people of Oak Hill has been one of struggle as freezing winters ended a thriving citrus business; the Florida legislature passed the “net ban” law, ending commercial fishing; federal cut backs in the space program meant loss of jobs; county cut backs ended parks and recreation services; the school was closed. As the people searched for hope, the City Commission and a task force of local citizens worked to establish a charter school, purchase the property, and move forward, but the terms were “out of reach” and the efforts were dashed. However, when it seemed as if hope was lost and the building was soon to be torn down, the compassionate heart of one local architect, Sid Corhern, continued to believe the school building should not be demolished, and he continued to look for another way. He sent out a “cry for help” to his friends, via the internet. A friend in New Jersey, Tom Gibbs, had just sold a piece of land and offered to help.

The local non-profit organization known as the Oak Hill Community Trust, Inc. voted to accept the offer of a caring stranger, and entered into a contract with Gibbs to borrow \$164,000, providing the means to purchase the school buildings and 10 acres of land from the Volusia County School Board. The purchase was finalized on October 30, 2009. This provided a new opportunity for “hope” to be born in the hearts of the people, and this “leap of faith” by the Community Trust began to open other doors.

As they shared the vision for the recent purchase of property, people began to come together to work on the building, which had been stripped and prepared for demolition. There was much work to be done on the facility: electrical, water, air conditioning, kitchen, flooring, painting, landscaping and grounds. Others participated in fundraisers to make the mortgage payment and purchase materials needed to begin facilities repair. Time was donated by caring volunteers.

The Kaplan Foundation, under the direction of Nick and Jeanne Dowis, were the first to help with their donation of \$10,000. Their investment enabled the Community Trust to obtain temporary power, purchase 7 dehumidifiers, hire an architect to complete a needs assessment and serve as a consultant in the beginning phases of the move forward.

Fundraisers included chicken dinner, "Italian-to-go" dinner, Thrift Shop, Auction, Sale of Memory Bricks, Pancake Breakfast in the Park, Golf Tournament, 5k River Run. The search for partnerships and writing of grants continued.

In the spring of 2010, there was an article in the newspaper about EdFutures, Inc, a management company for Charter Schools, opening a school in Lake Helen, about 35 miles away in Volusia County. They were contacted and asked if they would like to come to Oak Hill to see this empty facility and consider opening a charter school at this site. They responded favorably, and moved forward with a local Community Trust Education Committee to prepare a charter school application, which was submitted to the Volusia County School Board on July 27, 2010.

September 23, 2010 word was received via email from Donald Boulware, Program Accountability and Evaluation Coordinator for Volusia County Schools, that the Charter Evaluation Committee would recommend approval of the application for Burns Science and Technology Charter School, K-8. On September 27, 2010 at 6:00p.m., Deputy Superintendent for Instructional Services, Dr. Chris Colwell recommended "approval" to the Superintendent Margaret Smith and the School Board, and the vote was unanimous.

There was no communication between Sept. 27 and Dec. 7th. Gary Marks intervened to have the contract completed by Rich Kizma, VCSB Legal Council, and it was sent to Dr. Consuegra of EdFutures' for review. Contract negotiations took place in December, the contract was submitted and placed on the agenda for January 11th, and the School Board reviewed and voted unanimously to approve the contract at the January 25th Board meeting.

While the Oak Hill Community Trust originally voted to work with EdFutures, Inc., it was learned that a non-profit School Foundation had to be established, and at least one member with Charter certification had to serve on the "charter negotiation team." Dr. Consuegra had that required certification, and he was joined by Dr. Jan McGee and Gary Bittle to become the "Founding Board" for Burns Science & Technology Charter School Foundation, Inc. Members of this group became the new School Governing Board, and additional members were "invited" upon recommendations from community members. The purpose of this board was to "move this process forward" by hiring EdFutures, Inc., who had been working with the Community Trust organization since July 2009. All of their hours were done in "good faith" because of their relationship with the Community Trust and local people. They provided the "hope" to have what we could never do on our own...reopen our local school.

Volunteer work days were held once a month on the last Saturday from 8:00a.m. until 2:00p.m. . Painting and cleaning up the grounds began in September 2010, with individuals taking responsibility for specific areas. There have been hundreds of volunteers from ages 8 to 80+

who have worked thousands of hours to move the complex process to the point where the school could open.

Without the current Board Members moving immediately to official “HIRE” EdFutures, Inc., and approve funding (promissory note), we would not have had the funding that they provided “up front” to put in a new electrical system, air conditioning, flooring, etc. The school opened on August 22, 2011 with 260 students enrolled. This school began changing lives of children, adults, and the direction of the city.

During the first “start-up” year, the school received a state grant for \$375,000 to be used for furniture, books, technology, staff development. The school established partnerships with Canaveral Seashore Park at Seminole Rest and began a “Meet the Ranger” program. Once a Month Ranger Leslie Peters would visit classrooms and present a variety of programs, as well as host field trips to the Indian Mounds. By the end of the first year, Burns Sci-Tech established an adjunct classroom in the caretakers cottage on the National Park site. This relationship became the school’s “Partner of the Year.”