

# PENNY PULLEY



## Grants for Learning

By Narielle Living

Murawski Photography

In 2015, the WJCC school board and then superintendent Steve Constantino formed the WJCC Schools Foundation, a 501c3 nonprofit entity, to serve as a fundraising arm of the school division. Today, Penny Pulley, chair of the foundation, is excited about the direction they are headed.

The foundation started with a goal aimed to assist teachers in classroom education, and to ensure that they reached their goal, the school board members hired a consultant. According to Penny, that consultant helped them narrow down what they could do, and eventually they landed on something now called Innovative

Learning Grants, which are grants of up to \$4,000 for teachers. "We have a website application that opens in September, and we do double-blind grant reading, meaning that the people who are on the team of grant readers, about 15 people, use a rubric to determine who gets the grants. But we're double blind, meaning we don't know what teacher and we don't know what school [the grant is for]. There is one human who acts as an intermediary. That person does know the identity of the applicants and redacts whatever is in the application that would give it away. That person also acts as an answer person." Grants are

evaluated once per year and are awarded in February.

Funding comes almost entirely from individuals. "We have some corporate support," Penny says. "It's been an odd time since 2020, and our corporate support has dwindled somewhat. We lost a lot of our board members after 2020. Retired people left our board and moved closer to their families, and a lot of things like that happened. It's been a rebuilding period since COVID. But I am very happy to tell you that right now we have 20 board members. They are all assigned to committees. We have vice chairs. We have a technical specialist."

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Penny started as the secretary of the organization, one of the first board members. "When our prior chairperson passed away, it was tough," she says. "That was a dagger to the heart for us. She had believed that her cancer was in remission, and she probably served less than six months because her cancer came back and she died. So, I became the Chair in November 2019."

Penny and her husband, Larry, raised their children in James City County and both children attended public schools. When their kids were in school, Penny got involved in their education and became known as being a public school advocate. "I'd been on the PTA and the PTA Council. I've done all the things, so they asked me to serve on the board. I typically would have phased out to be a volunteer, but we really needed some cohesive leadership for this period."

The school board oversees the WJCC School Foundation. Penny prepares reports for them yearly, and the school superintendents serve on the board as well. "Dr. Keever is the new su-

perintendent, and his predecessor, Dr Herron, serves on our board as an ex officio member."

Teaching in a public school system is difficult, especially when teachers might be financially limited in how many extra supplies they can purchase that could enhance a classroom experience. The innovative learning grants try to address that.

"We've awarded the purchase of drones to Matthew Whaley Elementary as part of STEM training, which has been quite successful. We have also funded an outdoor classroom at Toano Middle School, including power banks and solar power banks, so students can study with their equipment outside. We partnered with Williams Landscaping, and they did some of the coverage so the sun is not too harsh. The schools and the teachers also partner with other people. Lafayette High School has an entire green room for students to study videography, photography, and journalism. A few years ago, students from Lafayette were recognized at the NPR podcast challenge."

Sometimes, however, not everything goes

according to plan. Once, a teacher was awarded a grant but left the school division prior to receiving the grant money. That money had to be returned to the foundation. "If they don't use it, it's not left in the school. It comes back to us. It's a specific grant for a specific purpose."

In 2020, Penny says they had planned to award a total of \$72,000 to teachers for innovative learning grants. "You can imagine how excited we were," she says. "We were five years old, and we were already awarding such a high amount." Then the pandemic hit and remote learning happened, but the advantage of being local is that they were able to also be fluid in their response. "We were the first to provide money to the school division to help students who didn't have Wifi access and didn't have computers or laptops. We awarded \$20,000 and we partnered with the Williamsburg Regional Library to provide Wifi hotspots in various places."

Penny is a 35-year resident of James City County. "I married my husband, Larry, and moved here from Virginia Beach. Larry was



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the dean of the Mason School of Business at William & Mary for 24 years. We raised our children, Rachel and Evan, here, and they're both now married and living in Richmond. They both graduated from William & Mary, and we are proud grandparents."

The foundation is preparing to celebrate their 10-year anniversary, starting with a gala event on October 9 at Legacy Hall in New Town. "We are going to be launching some new initiatives, but we want to raise awareness of the teacher supply shop, which we helped to initiate in 2022. The teacher supply shop gives teachers access to materials that they typically would either have had to go without or have purchased themselves."

Penny says that as a kid, she was a military brat. "I grew up in North Carolina and attended all 12 years of public school in North Carolina, which is an unusual thing for a Marine child to be able to do. Unlike the Army and Navy, Marines are not usually allowed to bring their families with them when they go on foreign duty. My dad would go on deployments

for six months or even 18 months at a time, and when he returned, he was able to trade his next duty station. He might be stationed in California or Kansas or who knows where, and he could trade with others with the same job description so that he wouldn't have to move. We wouldn't have to move. He would." Her father was a Mustang, a unique designation for an enlisted Marine who is commissioned as an officer.

The exception to the rule was her father could have one duty station with his family. The day after Penny graduated from high school, her parents moved to Morocco, North Africa. "I lived there for a couple of years and started attending the University of Maryland there, which has special opportunities for military families." Ultimately, Penny moved to Washington, DC, to live with her sister while she worked and attended classes. "My sister and I both ended up working in the Senate, and eventually she got married and moved to Minnesota with her husband, and I was a little lost and alone in Washington." She decided to

move to Virginia Beach and got a job at Alexander Beagle, a clothing store.

Alexander Beagle had been a men and boys retail store, but when Penny started working there, the new owners had added a high-end women's side. While she was working there, Larry had bought a suit from the men's side.

"The tailor couldn't get it to fit, so it took several times for him to try it on. And ultimately, because of this, we had bantered a number of times over the suit. Ultimately, he asked me out."

One thing led to another, and she ended up marrying the man with the suit. "He was already a professor here at William & Mary, and so I moved up here with him."

But most importantly, does he still have the suit? "He got rid of that suit, but he says it never fit," she says with a laugh.

Innovative learning grants make a difference, and Penny Pulley is working hard to create educational opportunities for as many students as possible, setting them up for a successful future. NDN

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