

NASCAR champ and his backers help build championship school programs

By Laura Thompson

The name Jimmie Johnson is synonymous with stock cars zooming around a racetrack at 200 miles per hour, the sound of roaring engines and the smell of burning rubber. But when the **Jimmie Johnson Foundation** is mentioned, Jimmie and his wife, Chandra, hope that their Foundation becomes synonymous with classrooms filled with smart-boards and laptops, the sounds of children playing on revamped playgrounds, the excitement of performances in renovated school auditoriums, the smell of art supplies and the rubber of a new running track.

In 2006, Chandra and Jimmie Johnson, a five-time NASCAR Sprint Cup Series champion, launched the Jimmie Johnson Foundation, which is dedicated to assisting children, families and communities in need.

Since then the Foundation has contributed almost \$6 million to various charities nationwide, including the Make-A-Wish Program, the Hendrick Marrow Program, Habitat For Humanity, Jimmie Johnson's Victory Lanes at Victory Junction, and the Ronald McDonald House of Charlotte.

The Johnsons still hold those programs close to their hearts, but the Foundation has sharpened their focus. As the economy took a downturn in 2008, they heard story after story about school budget and programming costs. Both Chandra and Jimmie are graduates of public schools and they are strong believers in the importance of education. The Johnsons now work to make an impact on schools in the places they call home: Muskogee, Okla., for Chandra; El Cajon, Calif., for Jimmie; and the hometown they have adopted as a family, Charlotte.

The Johnsons didn't set out to force-fit programs of their own design. Rather, they wanted each school to develop a program that specifically fits its needs and then request funding from the Foundation. Given the diversity of issues facing each school, this has been an enormous undertaking. But the Johnsons have plunged headlong into taking on the challenges.

The Foundation seeks to help 11 schools of the Hilldale and Muskogee Independent School District, 262 schools in San Diego, 159 schools in Charlotte-



Mecklenburg and 43 schools in Cabarrus County.

To help achieve their goal, the Johnsons partnered with Lowe's, their primary sponsor, to create the Jimmie Johnson Foundation/Lowe's Toolbox for Education Champions Grant. Lowe's is a well-established company with a commitment to education through the Lowe's Toolbox for Education grants program. Together, they are a force for change.

"Lowe's has been an instrumental supporter of the Jimmie Johnson Foundation since its inception," said Mary Barr, Executive Director of the Jimmie Johnson Foundation. "We turned to our friends at Lowe's for guidance on creating an impactful program. We are grateful for their continued amazing partnership, both on and off the racetrack."

How it works

The Champions Grant awards funding ranging from a minimum of \$25,000 to a maximum of \$100,000. Any public K-12 school, or any nonprofit parent group that has been in existence for more than two years in the above districts can apply.

The Johnsons want to meet each school to ensure that they can fulfill the school's needs. "We have been able to make grants to several of the schools that Jimmie

and I attended," Chandra said. "To be able to impact so many children in the areas where we grew up is incredible."

With Lowe's as a lead sponsor, the Foundation raises the bulk of its funds at its annual Jimmie Johnson Foundation Golf Tournament and Dinner, hosted each year in San Diego. This year's event raised more than \$600,000 that will go directly toward the Champion Grants awards and into grant-award winning schools.

Now in its fourth year, the Champions Grant program has given a total of \$2.6 million to 63 K-12 schools. The list of projects is as varied as the landscape of each community they serve: raise funds to upgrade, preserve and certify the last remaining precision machine tool technology program in the district; build language and literacy skills with new iMac computers and Imagine Learning software; create a school WeatherBug station; upgrade and modernize a 53-year-old woodshop; and expand outdoor classroom and provide experiential STEM learning opportunities.

"Chani has a soft spot for the arts programs," Jimmie said. "For me, it is so neat to see how many people we can help and affect with one grant. We had a chance to visit a STEM lab at a middle school in El Cajon and see our grant dollars in action, which was awesome."

Although the hectic pace of the

NASCAR race season frequently takes the Johnsons away from home, both Chandra and Jimmie find that their efforts have tied them more closely with the Charlotte community.

"I think the combination of our foundation focusing on education, and now having a daughter of our own [has created a bond to the community]," Jimmie said. "We are much more aware of the issues and the challenges. It is very cool when we hear from people in the community, especially other parents, who have children at a school that has received a Champions Grant."

A selection of grant recipients: In their own words

A.T. Allen Elementary School
Lori Tong, teacher

"This project will provide opportunities for children that they never would have experienced otherwise. It will make science and math REAL for so many of them and open the doors for future meteorologists and scientists. We are so excited and humbled by this generous gift. We look forward to working with you all!"

Billingsville Elementary School
Denise Bartos, SIG EC Instructional Coach
"The money we received from the Jimmie Johnson Foundation Champion Grant will

support the creation of a FITT (Frequency, Intensity, Time, Type) Lab. The equipment will support research indicating that healthy kids learn better. This opportunity will teach our students that people with healthy brains and bodies can achieve success both in and out of the classroom. As educators, this is a win-win situation for us, as we will be creating high achieving students with healthy bodies."

KIPP Charlotte
Amanda Prothero, Chief Development Officer

"Because of the generosity of the Jimmie Johnson Foundation, we now have smart boards in all of our science and math classrooms and we have sufficient laptops for testing and classroom purposes. We are so grateful to the Jimmie Johnson Foundation for supporting KIPP Charlotte and the KIPPsters on their climb to and through college."

Charlotte Mecklenburg Academies of Engineering
Tabatha Conley, teacher

"I can't thank you enough for all your help and for the opportunity the Jimmie Johnson Foundation has given our students. We have benefited greatly from the purchases made and our students have learned while enjoying the items, especially the Vex Robotics."

Photos courtesy of the Jimmie Johnson Foundation