By Lanie Thompson

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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 $60 million to various charities nationwide, including the Make-A-Wish Program, the Habitat for Humanity, Jimmie Johnson’s Victory Lane 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 in schools in the places where they call home: Muskogee, Okla., for Chandra; El Cajon, Calif., for Jimmie; and the hometowns they have adopted in a family, Charlotte.

The Johnsons didn’t set out to focus its programs on their own design. Rather, they wanted each school to design a program that specifically fits its needs and its support funding from the Foundation. Given the diversity of issues facing each school, the Fund has been an enormous undertaking. But the Johnsons have plunged headlong into taking on the challenge.

The Foundation seeks to help 15 schools in the following districts can apply. It has been in existence for more than two years to the above districts can apply.

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 public or private group that has been in existence for more than two years to the above districts can apply. The Johnsons want to meet each school’s needs in a way that they can fulfill their 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 funds of its grants to annually Jimmie Johnson Foundation’s Golf Tournament and Dinner, hosted each year in San Diego. This year’s event raised more than $900,000 that will go directly toward the Champions Grants awards and two grants-awarding schools.

Now in its fourth year, the Champion 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 for a new science lab; build and expand outdoor classroom opportunities; purchase enhanced technology program in the district; build language and literacy skills with new iMac computers and Imagine Learning software; create a school Weather lab; upgrade and modernize a 5-year-old woodworking; and expanded outdoor classroom and provide experiential STEM learning opportunities.

Chandra has a soft spot for the arts programs,” Jimmie said. “For me, it is so nice 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 amazing.”

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 them more closely with the Charlotte community.

“I think the Jimmie Johnson Foundation focuses on education, and now having a daughter of our own [has created a bond to the community],” Jimmie said. “We are able to be aware of the issues and the challenges. It is a real joy when we hear from people in the community, especially other parents, who have children at a school that has received a Champion Grant.”

A selection of grant recipients:

In their own words

A.T. Allen Elementary School

Denise Bartos, SIG EC Instructional Coach

“Thank you for all your hard work and for the opportunity the Jimmie Johnson Foundation has given our students. We have benefited greatly from the purchase made and our students have learned while enjoying the items, especially the VEX Robotics.”

Image courtesy of the Jimmie Johnson Foundation

NASCAR champ and his backers help build championship school programs