

LIFE BOOST

The Learn More Center Expanding in Wabash

By Rebecca Patrick and Anthony Schoettle

Cynthia Johnson envisions a place in her community where people can come to get a better handle on the English language, literacy training or meet the challenges to obtain a high school degree.

And after those obstacles are cleared, she sees people – at that same place – continuing to earn a professional certification or postsecondary degree needed for a high-paying job, and more than that, a career with real promise. Such a place would brighten the futures of those that come to seek its services, their families and the entire community.

Johnson, as it turns out, is the executive director of just such a place – the Learn More Center – which is investing more than \$800,000 to renovate the former Miller Furniture Store in Wabash into its new and expanded adult learning center.

Come on in

The new facility, which is slated to open this summer, will serve as a one-stop shop for a variety of educational needs, Johnson explains. It also will allow the organization to bring some of its partners under one roof to provide a comprehensive plan for adult learners.

At its expanded location, the non-profit organization will team up with educational providers and partners, including Ivy Tech Freedom Academy, Indiana University Kokomo, Purdue Manufacturing Extension Partnership,

Besiege LLC and Manchester University, to help area residents pursue basic literacy and English language courses, complete high school equivalency instruction, prepare for college, and pursue vocational training and industry standard certifications in a variety of areas.

The 10,000-square-foot center annually can accommodate programming for up to 250 area students, according to Johnson. That's more than twice as many as the organization can handle at its current Wabash home.

The Learn More Center, which is sustained by funding, grants and donations, primarily has operated out of North Manchester and brought its services to Wabash for only six hours per week. Johnson says that isn't nearly enough to meet demand.

She believes the new Wabash location will help remove the transportation barrier for many adults in the area. Up until now, a large number of Wabash County residents seeking additional education and training have been forced to take classes remotely.

"This will allow us in Wabash County to have a place where adults know they can go, and businesses and training partners know they can go and house those trainees and those experiences," Johnson emphasizes. "Our county has been working many, many years on this, and it's just taken a while to find the right place and be able to get everybody together."

Evolving core

The Learn More Center, founded in 2002

via a Lilly Endowment Inc. grant, graduates 40 to 50 students with a high school equivalency annually. Up until a few years ago, that was the bulk of its work, says Johnson, who has been with the organization 20 years.

"Our English language learning population has grown, so that's become (a bigger emphasis), but also we know our college and career (readiness training) has expanded – and it needs to continue to expand," she shares.

In its first year at the new location, the nonprofit and its partners aim to serve 150 students overall and at least 50 students in industry-recognized training programs.

"Our mission has started with the roots of literacy and grown into (college prep) and career transitions," Johnson imparts. "As we've grown and the state's done research, it's obvious that adults need a place to have (opportunities for) lifelong learning. So, our vision had been for a long time for an adult education hub where there was a wonderful lifelong continuum of services."

Worthy undertaking

The Learn More Center provides all its classes free of charge for those age 16 and older who are no longer in school.

Johnson says the next step for her and her staff will be reaching out to businesses to see what their demands are for trained employees so they can tailor equipment acquisitions, coursework and other training for those needs.

Johnson also will be talking to area businesses to secure ongoing funding for the center and to help bring in instructors from the local business sector.

Most of all, she's looking forward to giving the organization's longtime mission a bigger platform.

"Our mission includes working with students who didn't used to feel safe, didn't used to feel included for whatever reason, whether it's a learning disability or poverty or being on the (autism) spectrum," Johnson offers.

"We want this to be a place where people can come and learn and feel safe. We offer a lot of individualized instruction. We don't have huge, massive classes that you're forced to attend for certain amounts of time, but (classes in which) you can be included and succeed at your pace. And I just want that for more people."



The Learn More Center guides people through obtaining their high school diploma as well as earning professional certifications and/or enrolling in college. A sustainable wage job is the ultimate attainment for those they serve.

RESOURCE: Cynthia Johnson, Learn More Center, at www.thelearnmorecenter.org