

Carnegie Elementary School opens **FreeStore 15106**

By Bob Podurgiel

When Carlynton School District second-grade teacher Don Alexander reached out to Gisele Fetterman for an idea to help children in the local community, she suggested a food pantry, giving birth to FreeStore 15106 at Carnegie Elementary School.

The store, which opened on Feb. 23, features an array of health and beauty items such as soap, shampoo and toothpaste, along with gently used clothing and non-perishable food items for the students to choose from at no cost to them or their parents. The FreeStore (as they're writing it) is housed in a converted storage room behind the school's auditorium stage.

The store is open to all students in need at the school, which has an enrollment of 414.

"We wanted to focus on families struggling to get by, and the people rallied together to help out," said Mr. Alexander, who worked with Ms. Fetterman on opening the store and finding ways to keep it operating.

Mr. Alexander, who lives in the North Hills and has spent 22 years teaching at Carnegie Elementary, involved the students from the start by enlisting those with families who had the means to make donations to the store, with each class focusing on a particular category of item most in demand.

"Kindergarten students were assigned socks to donate, and first grade students brought in various



Photos courtesy of Donald Alexander

Sixth grader Rimas Al Ajwe cuts the ribbon for the new FreeStore 15106 at Carnegie Elementary School.

goods for all

canned food items. We wanted the kids to feel a sense of ownership of the store by helping their friends and neighbors, and

with him in the past on another initiative for the school, establishing "The Chill Program" as a means to help children who are



The new FreeStore 15106 at Carnegie Elementary School.

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In the new FreeStore 15106 at Carnegie Elementary School are, in the back row from left, Giselle Fetterman, Rimyas Al Ajwe, Danah Alghamdi and Evey Fahnestock, and, front row from left, Won Paing Nyan, Emmett Spitzer, Ben Doan, Maurice Segnonou, and Amina Altaan (girl in gray). Amina is a second grader who designed the FreeStore's logo.

friends and neighbors, and we wanted to make them feel proud of our school," he said.

Initial items for the store opening came from Ms. Fetterman, but now students and donors from the community are helping to restock the shelves with new donations.

"Each week a donor, who is not even from Carnegie, goes out and buys milk and bread for the store, enough to give the kids who need it a bag to take home on Friday," he said.

Ms. Fetterman, the wife of Lt. Gov. John Fetterman, said it was a beautiful thought for Mr. Alexander to reach out to her with the request for a project to benefit the community.

She said she has worked

to help children who are struggling with anxiety or anger issues. Rather than facing immediate punishment, the children are given time and counseling to work on changing their behavior.

"Any community in need can reach out to me with an idea for a project to benefit the community," Ms. Fetterman said.

The first Free Store, which she established in Braddock where her husband served as mayor for 13 years from 2006 to 2019, was called Free Store 15104, named for the Braddock area ZIP code. New stores are differentiated the same way; 15106 is the ZIP code for Carnegie.

So far the Free Store concept has branched out to 13 locations.

Most are in Pennsylvania, she said, citing stores now operating in Wilkinsburg, Penn Hills, Media and Erie, but a new store recently opened in New Mexico.

"We rely on the teachers to find out from the kids in need what specific items they need," she said.

A wish list is posted on Instagram. Donors who want to help can also go to Facebook and enter FreeStore 15106 to find out more about what items are in most demand at the Carnegie location.

Local residents can drop off items at boxes set up at Dagny's Restaurant and the Carnegie Coffee Co., both on East Main Street in Carnegie, Mr. Alexander said.

While FreeStore 15106 is still in its infancy, Mr. Alexander said, he has bigger

plans for the store.

"We want to involve the students more in stocking shelves and operating the store. We want to add a time for the families of students when they can come to the store," he said.

Students can now visit the store by making an appointment during school hours, but he sees the store as just one element of a larger vision.

"We are working to transform the culture of the whole community by working with the entire family," he said. "Our overall goal is to make our school the center of our community."

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