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Fiji Water founder's vision, donation helps kickstart Westgate state-of-the-art preschool

By Teri Berg Special to The Post

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The new Opportunity school opened this past August thanks in large part to multimillion-dollar donations from Fiji Water founder and philanthropists David and Jillian Gilmour.

WESTGATE -- When the doors of one Opportunity in Westgate closed, another and more promising Opportunity opened.

Right across the street, in fact.

The old Opportunity preschool now sits empty on the south side of Westgate Avenue, just east of Military Trail, its parking lot near capacity with BMWs, Mercedes-Benzes and other luxury sedans not normally seen in such numbers in this neighborhood just north of West Palm Beach.

The new place, Opportunity Early Childhood Education & Family Center, sits on the north side of the street, beautified by fresh paint and new lighting and landscaping. Near the gated entrance stands a brightly colored sculpture by artist Edwina Sandys, granddaughter of Winston Churchill, called "Paradise Regained."

The new Opportunity school, which opened this past August thanks in large part to multimillion-dollar donations from Fiji Water founder and philanthropists David and Jillian Gilmour, comes much closer to Eden than its forebear. Its parking lot now leased to a local car dealer, the Mary Alice Fortin Early Childhood Center opened in 2003 as one of 13 child care/nursery schools in Palm Beach County run by Opportunity Inc. dating back to 1943.

Ali Eger, Opportunity's executive director, says the new facilities will allow for the enrollment of 285 children, ranging in age from 6 weeks to 5 years.

"The old school could only seat 85," she said.

Eger's vision for the campus is not yet complete, though it's well on the way.

The state-of-the-art facilities, funded with the help of a \$2 million gift from the Gilmours, who later donated \$10 million to kickstart Opportunity's hoped-for \$50 million endowment fund, offer a lot more than ample seating. Its mission to provide at-risk children with top-notch preschool education and socialization programming, the school houses an array of age-appropriate learning and activity spaces; a Carson Reading Room (thanks to retired neurosurgeon and current U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Secretary Ben Carson); an industrial-sized kitchen, food pantry and banquet room; and clusters of administrative offices.

Opportunity's outdoor spaces appear as thoughtfully planned, tended and welcoming as its classrooms. "Each age group has its own playground," Eger said, all with their own oval walking paths and age-appropriate toys and activities.

Two groups of children played outside during a recent tour, each composed of four or five youngsters accompanied by two or three teachers and volunteer helpers.

Beyond the bordered play areas is a blossoming farm-to-table garden and tall, shady fruit trees.

Back inside, work continues. Eger's checklist of projects nearing completion includes three more classrooms; a health clinic, staffed by a registered nurse; a lending library; a development office; and space devoted to parental needs, ranging from parenting skills training to computer work stations where parents can apply for jobs and housing.

Eger said work is expected to be completed by September.

At 89, David Gilmour, entrepreneur and founder of Fiji Water, looks around the school with joy.

Not long ago, he said, this unincorporated neighborhood was in dire straits, dotted with shacks and overrun by gangs. Gang activity has quieted, Gilmour said, thanks to regular patrols by the Palm Beach Sheriff's Office and by the

department's community engagement and work with task-force groups. Gilmour also believes the school itself may be playing a part in turning around the neighborhood.

"The children come to school well turned out -- their parents are proud they're here," he said. "There's a record of success that helps set children -- and their families -- on a different path."

The wait list to enroll now numbers 350, according to Eger, after peaking at 575 last fall. Opportunity's graduates, at just 5 years old, Gilmour said, "are highly sought by county schools."

The Gilmours, who have helped found and fund learning centers and schools across the globe for going on 35 years, advocate tirelessly for Opportunity's brand of early childhood education.

In addition to enjoining others who, like him, live "across the bridge" in Palm Beach to invest in the school and its mission, Gilmour said that recently he and Jillian spoke with "high Cabinet-level staff" in the Trump administration and proffered an invitation to visit the school.

"This I hope will be the prototype for schools across the nation," Gilmour said. "If we're going to make a difference in society, it is with children that we must start."