Education

Really going to town

Junior Achievement pulls out all the stops for its innovative $17M learning center on University Ave.

By Frank Joshi

A former charter school building at 1745 University Ave. opens the week of January 7 as the new St. Paul headquarters for Junior Achievement of the Upper Midwest (JAUM). Named the James R. and Patricia Hemak Experimental Learning Center, the extensively renovated 100-year-old building gives the organization enough room to double the number of students it serves by its onsite programs from 17,000 to 34,000.

"We really wanted to expand our programs to reach more kids," said president and chief executive officer Gina Blayney. "Junior Achievement was in Maplewood, but we really wanted to move back to the urban core to be closer to a larger population of kids. We can now double the number of kids we can serve in two programs and have an incubator center for high schoolers.

The new $17 million learning center is part of a $20 million Let's Build campaign that will pay for the building and programming. Blayney said, "The building has new offices with improved technology, a training center and auditorium on the first floor, a new incubator for high school students in the basement, and expanded versions of its two popular programs, JA BizTown and JA Finance Park, on the two upper levels.

Sustainability is one of the focuses of the learning center. The facility boasts a 40-kilowatt solar installation on the roof, Blayney said, and students will have the opportunity to monitor its energy production. The organization hopes to reach LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification from the U.S. Green Building Council within the next three years.

Wendy Patzaff organizes learning props in the Great Clips model salon in BizTown.

Mortenson Construction, which managed the building's renovation and is one of the country's largest installers of solar panels and wind turbines, copromotes a program in which students learn about opportunities in clean energy.

"We're excited about the new building and the chance to bring financial education to up-and-coming youths," said Kelly Mansell of Mortenson. "Selfishly, they teach business and entrepreneurial skills, which is what we need in our workforce as well. It's helping us feed our own employee pipeline."

The learning center devotes the 12,000-square-foot second floor to JA BizTown, a simulated city where students in grades 4-6 learn what it is like to be an adult for a day. They apply to work at one of 18 businesses, complete with storefronts, learning about loans, sales, marketing, paychecks and banking, among other activities, Blayney said.

Teachers prepare students for JA BizTown by using a curriculum that fits with state standards. Local companies sponsor businesses in the simulation. More than 100 students can participate in the town at one time, along with 36 volunteers and three to five teachers.

"JA BizTown is about giving students a chance to use those basic skills they learned in the classroom in an economic environment," Blayney said.

"The first class in the new learning center will include students from Highland Park Elementary School led by Tami Winther. "Last year, we had the opportunity to bring some fourth-graders with us and their enthusiasm has carried over to this year's class," she said. "Our whole fifth-grade buzzed about our upcoming trip to BizTown. This curriculum builds confidence and lets students practice JUNIOR ACHIEVEMENT know anything different."

Jim Hemak, who with his wife donated $4 million to the project, worked in Junior Achievement for 16 years before becoming a Great Clips franchisee, owning and eventually selling 39 stores. He owes part of his success, he said, to a Junior Achievement program he took part in as a Columbia Heights High School student in the early 1960s. His Junior Achievement company assembled bird houses and he did well enough to win an award from the organization for helping run the company that showed the most improvement.

Ann Marie Giefer sets equipment in the Mortenson Construction shop, part of the BizTown simulated city in Junior Achievement of the Upper Midwest's new experiential learning center at 1745 University Ave. Photos by Brad Chappell.

positive communication, cooperation, integrity, independence, respect and self-management skills in a safe environment.

Middle and high school students attend JA Finance Park, which focuses more on financial literacy, personal finance, credit, income and budgets, investments and banking. The simulation is designed to improve college and workforce readiness through giving students a host of financial decisions they have to make throughout the day, Blayney said.

The basement hosts the JA Innovation Incubator, where 80 high schoolers will work on their own businesses with assistance from volunteers. The students will have access to state-of-the-art technology, including a digital business startup platform. Past companies included one that created a coffee shop in a high school and another that sold biodegradable bags.

The companies are liquidated after 20 weeks, but students can restart them and potentially submit them to the Minnesota Cup, youth division startup competitions. "This generation is very entrepreneurial in terms of their aspirations," Blayney said. "They don't "To this day, outside of some family things, that was one of the biggest thrills of my life," Hemak said. "That was a real turning point and had a dramatic impact on my life." Now he's hoping the same thing that happened to him will happen to others. "There's a lot of things happening qualitatively and quantitatively with this facility that are really excited about," he said. "It's a bigger and better location. It's been very well received.

JAUM serves more than 165,000 students in grades K-12 in Minnesota, North Dakota and three western Wisconsin counties. More information about the organization is available at jaum.org.