

Ivester Foundation awards Wellroot \$300K for Hall County families facing emergencies - Gainesville Times



Wellroot Family Services, a Georgia nonprofit that provides foster care, counseling and housing assistance for children and families, has received a \$300,000 grant to help Hall County families facing sudden financial emergencies.

The Melvin Douglas and Victoria Kay Ivester Foundation awarded the grant to establish the Ivester Foundation Stabilization Fund, which will provide emergency financial assistance to children, young adults and families receiving Wellroot services in Hall County.

The money is intended for expenses that may not be covered by traditional assistance programs, such as rent, utility bills, transportation costs or car repairs.

"Every family can face a moment when a single obstacle threatens to derail their future," said Swinton Griffith, director of the Ivester Foundation. "A missed rent payment, a car repair, a utility bill, or another unexpected expense can create a fork in the road that leads either toward greater stability or deeper crisis."

The fund will allow Wellroot to respond to those needs before a financial problem leads to eviction, housing instability or child welfare involvement, according to the organization.

"Many of the families we serve are working hard to build stable lives, but unexpected challenges can quickly place that progress at risk," Wellroot President and CEO Allison Ashe said.

She said the funding could be used to prevent an eviction, keep utilities on or help a family maintain transportation to work.

The grant comes as Wellroot expands its presence in Hall County.

Formerly known as The United Methodist Children's Home, Wellroot Family Services has operated in Georgia for more than 150 years.

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An old Gainesville church that dates back to the 1930s is being taken apart piece by piece — but it isn't being demolished.

St. Michael Catholic Church is dismantling its original stone church in the 800 block of Spring Street near Northeast Georgia Medical Center and plans to rebuild it at the parish's current campus as an Adoration Chapel.

The old church was built in 1933, and St. Michael used it for decades before moving to a larger location in the 1970s.

Deacon Ken Lampert, the church's business manager, said parish leaders had hoped for years to find a way to save the building.

"It was prayers answered over many years," Lampert said.

The church's stained-glass windows were removed several weeks ago and are being restored. Crews began taking apart the rest of the building this week.

The stones will be marked, catalogued and stored at a fenced contractor yard in Cleveland until St. Michael is ready to rebuild the chapel at its current campus at [1440 Pearce Circle](#).

A church dating back to 1933

A March 1934 newspaper article published in The Bulletin of the Catholic Laymen's Association of Georgia described the chapel as being built with Stone Mountain granite and

featuring an altar made of pink Georgia marble.

The article said the church was designed by the Rev. Michael McNerney of Belmont Abbey in North Carolina and dedicated April 30, 1933, by Savannah Bishop Michael J. Keyes.

At the time, Gainesville did not have a resident Catholic priest and was served from Athens.

Lampert said the chapel was the first Catholic church in the Gainesville area.

St. Michael eventually outgrew the small building. In 1975, when the parish had about 100 families, the church sold the property to help pay for a larger church.

Today, Lampert said, St. Michael has more than 1,500 families and roughly 3,500 to 4,000 parishioners.

How St. Michael got the church back

The property eventually became part of a block acquired by Medical Arts Properties, an investment partnership led by Gainesville real estate executive Frank Norton Jr.

Norton said Medical Arts bought the property several years ago for more than \$1.3 million as it gradually acquired the surrounding block for its Medical Arts campus.

The roughly 2,200-square-foot former church was never slated for demolition, Norton said.

Instead, Medical Arts considered incorporating it into a future development, possibly as a conference center or entrance to another building.

But when St. Michael approached him about getting the building back, Norton said another idea made more sense.

"This is, in our opinion, so much better an idea," he said.

Lampert said church leaders had been looking for a way to bring the chapel back to St. Michael for years.

He said Norton also helped financially with the cost of dismantling the church. The Fetsko Estate made a contribution as well. Lampert declined to disclose the amounts.

'It's not being demolished'

Norton said some people have misunderstood the work underway at the site and assumed the historic building was simply being torn down.

That is the opposite of what is happening, he said.

"It's not being demolished — it's being disassembled and then reconstructed," Norton said.

Norton said preserving the church also fits with his family's long history of historic preservation in Gainesville.

The land where the chapel now stands will eventually become part of the broader master plan for the Medical Arts campus, though Norton said there are no immediate plans for the site.

"I feel like in my heart, we're doing the right thing by preserving it for all of the community," he said.

Rebuilding it piece by piece

Ron Cantrell Construction of Cleveland is handling the dismantling work.

Lampert said most of the building was expected to be taken apart by the end of this week.

He said the church hopes to rebuild the chapel within the next year or two, though the timeline will depend largely on fundraising.

Part of a larger expansion

The chapel is only one piece of St. Michael's plans.

Lampert said the church expects to launch a fundraising campaign after the first of the year seeking a little more than \$4 million.

A little more than \$2 million would go toward dismantling and rebuilding the historic chapel, he said. The rest would pay for expanded worship space and additional classrooms.

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