

## **Little England Mercantile's Karen and Steve Barrs Launch Workforce Development Scholarship Fund, EquipVA**

*EquipVA supports students working to complete Workforce Credential Programs at Thomas Nelson Community College and Rappahannock Community College.*

For immediate release.

**GLOUCESTER POINT, VIRGINIA (January 29, 2018)** – Equipping people with the tools they need to strengthen their lives, families and community. That's what Karen and Steve Barrs of Little England Mercantile have set out to do with EquipVA, a new scholarship fund they established this week for college students working toward a professional certification at [Rappahannock Community College](#) or [Thomas Nelson Community College](#).

"EquipVA speaks to exactly what we are all coming together to do – equip others with the skills they need to move on and up in their life and career," Karen Barrs said. "We want to give people who may not have thought they had a future in higher education another option to help earn family-sustaining wages."

Specifically, EquipVA sets out to support students working on certifications in health care, IT, logistics, transportation, skilled trades, welding, manufacturing, architecture and construction.

EquipVA builds on the success of the [New Economy Workforce Credential Grant Program](#) developed during the 2016 General Assembly Session to create and sustain a supply of credentialed workers to fill high-demand occupations in fields which support the state's economy while making the attainment of these credentials more affordable.

"Virginia's Community Colleges are uniquely prepared to meet the Commonwealth's emerging challenges and opportunities through education, job training and workforce development," said Jennifer Gentry, Executive Director, The Virginia Foundation for Community College Education. "This scholarship fund will help students pursue a short-term training program, which will lead to career and job growth. We encourage other businesses and individuals to join in with EquipVA to give more students an opportunity to advance their education and start a path to earning higher wages and improving the economy and workforce."

The fund launched with pledged support from multiple businesses on Virginia's Middle Peninsula and Peninsula regions, including Yorktown Materials, C.A. Barrs Contractor, Oyster Cove Boatworks & Yacht Brokerage, Off Leash K9 Training Hampton Roads and Consociate Media. Little England Mercantile will also continue its support with proceeds from sales at its Gloucester Point store, living up to its promise to provide provisions with purpose.

Barrs said the goal is to have \$50,000 in the EquipVA fund by summer 2018. With every \$10,000 investment, six students can begin a new career path within weeks.

While state-funded support can help students pay for up to two-thirds of the tuition for workforce credentialing programs, most programs cost on average \$4,500 per student, not including books and other materials needed for completion.

EquipVA scholarships will fund the student's portion of tuition not already covered, including third-party certification fees, books and required materials/equipment.

"The mission behind EquipVA has always been about individuals and the support we can give them, but the impact we hope to make is much broader," said Barrs, who lives and works in Gloucester. "By supporting the workforce in our community, we hope to keep them in our community and help grow the community in positive ways."

According to recent state figures, the Middle Peninsula suffers from a more than 74 percent out-commuter rate, and on top of that, many people move out of the region for education and job opportunities.

"What that means for Gloucester is that we have created a great place to live, but people are leaving the community and taking their talents to other regions," said Lewie Lawrence, Director of the Middle Peninsula Planning District Commission. "Launching a scholarship fund like this helps move us closer to equipping people in our community with the skills they need to then work in our community. The next step is to show businesses that we have the talent here, we are training the people here, and can equip their businesses with them if they choose to locate their companies here."

The Barrs hope that this fund will eventually become a statewide program and serve students at any of the 23 community colleges in Virginia.

Pledges to the EquipVA fund can be made online at <http://bit.ly/2nnc68X>. Pledges can also be made by contacting Karen Barrs through [www.littleenglandmercantile.com](http://www.littleenglandmercantile.com). Businesses can earmark their contributions to support a specific trade or region.

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