

## Why Norbel School Deserves a \$5,000 Back-To-School Grant From Dollar General

This might be an unusual application. It is written from a personal and emotional perspective, rather than from a more clinical or dry viewpoint. In that regard, the application reflects the passionate commitment of the Norbel faculty and staff—and is an important part of what makes the school so successful.

*“Build it, ...and they will come.”*

In the much-loved movie, “Field of Dreams,” the central character builds a professional baseball field in his cornfield. Most watch from afar in amusement, but this does not deter the dreams of this man. Repeatedly haunted by the words, “build it, and they will come,” he follows his calling and builds an impressive playing field—trusting that, in the end, the legendary players and supportive fans will arrive.

As the new Grant Writer/Fundraiser at Norbel School, these words came to me as I researched foundation and corporate guidelines for grant submissions. It was very late at night and my enthusiasm was surely getting the best of me. But, as I thought about the many needs of the school and, in particular focused on the almost \$200,000 needed to provide core curriculum reading materials for our new multi-media center, those exact words came to me, over and over—*Build it, ...and they will come.*

Of the \$200,000 required to furnish the Center, a small amount in that targeted library budget is slotted to purchase a new “reader series” to teach literacy skills. The current materials are seriously out-dated and this must be addressed immediately. Because children with learning disabilities all learn at different levels of mastery, this collection of a variety of “readers” is an absolute necessity—and long overdue.

The amount from the overall budget necessary for this particular portion of our fundraising initiative is an estimated \$6,000. It is the first step, as children must learn to read before they will benefit from all the other materials that will very soon grace the shelves of the Merritt Multi-Media Center. And so, we will start with the basics and hope to win the Dollar General Back-To-School Grant, with the \$5,000 award almost covering the total costs of these most essential learning tools.

I am beginning only my third week as part of the Norbel team, yet my commitment to this K-12 independent school began the moment I walked through that door for my first interview. I remember, so vividly, an unmistakable air of happiness in the environment—among both staff and students. It was unlike anything I had witnessed before...and I have worked at *plenty* of other human service related settings! Somehow, Norbel School was different.

Now, I will tell you, I almost didn’t apply for this position. Had it been a typical private school that was seeking a grant writer, I would not be writing to you today. But, Norbel is *not* a typical private school. One glance at their website and I knew I needed to submit my resume for consideration.

My background has been predominantly in working with persons with disabilities, so Norbel was a logical choice—as least for an interview—since it provides highly specialized educational services for kids with learning challenges. But, no sooner did I enter the building that I found myself drawn to the place, the people, and the mission.

The initial interview was with the Headmaster, Associate Headmaster, and Public Relations Coordinator. While a panel interview can be a stressful situation for anyone, I felt at ease due to the enthusiasm we shared and the clear, and mutual, commitment to doing truly exceptional work. The ideas flowed, laughter was exchanged, and voices increased in volume, just a bit, as we expressed our common passion towards meeting the needs of *all* children with learning challenges, not just those whose families can afford the tuition at Norbel without substantial or complete financial assistance. I saw before me, energized, insightful, committed, impassioned, and innovative leaders—and I wanted to be a part of it.

After what I felt was a particularly good first interview, the Public Relations Coordinator, Krys Renzi, took me on a tour. I could see first-hand the triumphs, as well as the challenges still facing the school. For sure, the enthusiasm of the school's administration trickles down to the teachers who clearly love their work and the kids they are educating. I couldn't help but make mental notes of all the things the school needs, and how I, who hadn't even been *offered* the position, could help to obtain the funding to rectify this.

Krys continued to take me through the school, explaining the high-tech modifications to the building, such as specialized overhead lighting that, unlike typical classroom lights, produces no "hum." Something I never thought of, I admit, but Krys was right—that *would* provide an incredible distraction to a child with Attention Deficient Disorder (ADD). She went on to show me how the colors, patterns, and textures of the décor served a specific purpose in helping children who learn differently.

Norbel educates children of average, above average, and gifted intelligence, who face a plethora of learning challenges—Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), language delays/learning disabilities, Dyslexia, Dyscalcula, Dysgraphia, Asperger's Syndrome, and others. For so many of these kids, this is the first educational environment in which they have truly succeeded.

In a bittersweet moment, this brought to mind my younger brother who has learning disabilities. I only wish he had this type of opportunity while in his educational years. It would have made all the difference for him and his future. Instead, there was so much academic potential lost and so many continued struggles for him in certain areas of life. I am convinced that Norbel School would have been the answer for Tim. He is such a gifted man. Bright. A creative and talented musician and artist. Charismatic and kind. And, deeply loved by all in his community. Where *could* he be, if only for an effective educational system that would have helped him reach his fullest potential?

Despite my disappointment in my brother's educational prospects, I *am* happy to know that other learning-disabled children can benefit from this "state of the art" approach to education. It has been needed for so long—and even more so now, as more and more children are diagnosed with learning disabilities every day. The current school systems are ill equipped to accommodate different learning styles, especially as growing class size is making it all the more difficult for teachers. It's not their fault, but a systemic change must be made.

This is why I was particularly impressed with Norbel's low teacher-to-student ratio of 1:6. That is practically unheard of in today's school settings. But, it is also clear that this is what provides for the success of Norbel School—that, plus completely individualized educational programming with an emphasis on both academic achievement *and* social skills development. While the school is highly academic in purpose, its academic research and practices of the most effective educational paradigms in specialized teaching both intrigued and inspired me. In existence for 25 years, the school is a forerunner in customized educational practices. And, it is tremendously exciting that they continue to conduct research to modify their model according to findings, while sharing information and expertise with others regionally, and, soon, nationally.

Norbel's philosophy was a perfect match for my own, as we share a great respect for individual styles of learning and growing. In my short time here, it is abundantly clear that the school extends this appreciation of

individuality and respect to *all* persons—students and staff alike. This is so important to me, as I believe, wholeheartedly, that it is through this daily celebration of differences, along with each person’s unique contribution to this world, that remarkable things can happen. And, despite the remaining needs of the school, the enthusiasm of the school’s staff would never indicate a lack of resources. Suffice it to say, I was hooked immediately. I *needed* to join the Norbel effort. In my estimation, there was no other place for me BUT Norbel.

The tour continued as Krys and I made our way into the new Merritt Multi-Media Center, a two-story structure with computers, library-like seating, location of the students’ new business venture—the “Off The Wall Café,” a performing arts section, and an extensive jungle gym set-up that runs right through the center of the rooms from the ground level to the second floor.

It certainly was beautiful. But, what was missing—and what struck me most—was the absence of books on the shelves. Sure, they had a few. But, for such an incredible addition to the school’s extensive offerings, it was severely under-resourced. This was noted in my mind and became, along with increasing the scholarship fund to enable more economically disadvantaged children to benefit from this exceptional academic setting, a personal goal for me—if I was hired, that is.

As I returned for my second interview, more creative ideas were generated between the Norbel administration and myself, and it fully reinforced to me that my initial gut feeling regarding this employment opportunity was correct. It was energizing. Inspiring. Innovative. Empowering. Full of possibilities. This was not just a job I *could* do... it was one I felt I *must* do. Norbel was, indeed, the “home” I had been searching for. So, when I was asked to join the team, of course I quickly accepted. After years of searching for the right “fit” and holding out until that unique scenario was discovered, I have finally found my place and true calling—A place where I could be met with equally positive people who are tireless advocates, educators, and change-agents.

So, now it is time to go to work—for there is much to do. And, as I learn more about the whole range of current needs and the exciting vision for the school’s future—and wonder, at times, exactly where to begin—I am reminded that accomplishments are achieved, one block at a time. The leaders of this awe-inspiring educational institution have the faith to create what is needed and to *believe* that resources will become available to fund such endeavors. Certainly that does not come about without tremendous effort and active recruitment of one’s team. But I, the newest rookie at the moment, am proud to say I work at Norbel School and I fully embrace my role in its future growth.

Like the innovative and “cutting edge” academic and social opportunities provided for learning-disabled children who, before, only experienced frustration and failure within the traditional educational system, Norbel School continues to build. Building solid programs, projects, buildings and rooms—but also a sense of community, belonging, and family. All of this is working towards one end result, which is, insuring a promising future for each Norbel student, as well as any other child with learning disabilities. THAT is the stuff upon which dreams are built.

Yes, Norbel *has* built it.

Will *YOU* come?