Early Childhood Education and Public School District 186 programs are the focus of a fund recently established at the Community Foundation for the Land of Lincoln by Barb and Clark Olson. Barb and Clark attend First Presbyterian Church and heard Community Foundation Founding Board Chair Judy Stephens speak about its work and impact long ago. Recently, as the Olsons began to explore avenues for making philanthropic contributions, their financial advisor Mark Ridley brought up the possibility of the Community Foundation.

A tour of District 186’s Early Learning Center showed Barb the progress that’s been made since searching, unsuccessfully, years ago for early childhood educational opportunities to meet the needs of their son, Tom. Today, the need for such programs is greater than ever, and the Olsons hope to help bring these early educational programs within the reach of all families.

After seeing how their fund could tie in with programs like Nurse-Family Partnership, which helps low-income, first-time mothers, and Ready to Learn, which screens preschoolers’ readiness for kindergarten, the Olsons created the Early Childhood Education Fund, a field of interest fund to help all areas of early childhood development. The idea and hope is that those strong building blocks create a better foundation for District 186 and public schools in general.

Reminders of the importance of education, and particularly early childhood education, have come throughout Barbara and Clark Olson’s lives. Just out of graduate school, they and their two children, Ruth and Tom, ventured to Ethiopia. Clark taught biology and chemistry at the National University’s School of Public Health, and Barb taught first grade at the college’s elementary school, which was conducted in English. Ruth, who was four, and Tom, who was nearly three, began their educational experience in classrooms with children of many nationalities, including Ethiopian and Indian, and many different faiths.

When the family returned to the U.S., Tom was diagnosed with developmental disabilities, and the family struggled to find pre-kindergarten schools that would even allow him to attend, let alone accommodate his needs. So, now, in deciding how to give back to the community, helping strengthen early childhood education was a natural choice.

The Olsons have lived in Springfield for nearly 40 years. Clark worked for the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency, and Barb worked as a hospital Social Worker at McFarland Mental Health Center and Kemmerer Village in Assumption. Ruth and Tom graduated from
Springfield High School. Soon after graduation, Tom was killed in a traffic accident. Ruth graduated from Knox College, married, and now lives with her husband and their two children, Grace and Mike, in western Virginia.

Clark said, “The community enabled us to accumulate far more than we need. Now our responsibility is to decide how best to use it.” Barb added, “The idea of being able to give some of it back to the community only seems appropriate.”

Part of establishing this field of interest fund is the hope that other donors would share their same passion for early childhood education. By creating a permanent funding source for this cause, the Olsons have ensured that local early childhood education initiatives will receive support today and for generations to come.

For more information on starting a field of interest fund, or how to contribute to the Early Childhood Education Fund, please contact the Community Foundation at 217.789.4431 or visit CFLL.org.