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Scholarship fund named for port union marks 30 years of giving in Jacksonville | Opinion

Charles Spencer Guest columnist

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Key Points AI-assisted summary ⓘ

The ILA Local 1408 Scholarship Fund, established 30 years ago, has awarded over \$1 million to 1,035 students.

Funded by donations, corporate sponsors and an annual golf tournament, the fund supports first-generation college students pursuing higher education.

The fund's founder, Charles Spencer, a longshoreman, was inspired by his own children's college experiences and his mother's emphasis on helping others.

Looking back, it's hard to believe it has been three decades since we kicked off the [ILA Local 1408 Scholarship Fund](#). What started with a modest \$20,000 in donations from fellow port union workers in 1995 has grown into a thriving fund, supported by generous outside donors, corporate sponsors and proceeds from our annual fundraising golf tournament.

In 2025, we celebrate the 30th anniversary of providing scholarships to deserving students who dream of a college education — many of whom are first-generation college students. The fund is named in honor of ILA Local 1408, the union that represents many of the [dedicated dock workers](#) who keep Jacksonville's seaport running smoothly.

People often ask me why I'm so passionate about supporting education, and my answer is simple: Every child, regardless of their family's financial situation, deserves access to a quality education.

For me, the inspiration for this journey began decades ago when two of my own children were attending [universities in Tallahassee](#) at the same time. Back then, there was no scholarship for our family. I witnessed firsthand how quickly the costs of housing, tuition and books can accumulate.

It became clear to me that many parents, like myself, find it challenging to fully support their children's educational dreams. This reality is even more pressing today, as [economic challenges continue to impact so many families](#) in our community.

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My mother taught me the importance of helping others, saying that when you keep your hand open, while you may give a lot, you also invite more to be given. Indeed, more has come in for our fund. Over the years, as the port has grown, many union members have continued to give back and our corporate sponsors have generously supported us year after year.

This momentum has enabled us to expand our reach and provide even more students with the opportunity to pursue their higher education goals. To date, we've awarded 1,035 scholarships, totaling over \$1 million. We would not have reached this point without the incredible generosity of our partners, sponsors and the Jacksonville community.

One thing that truly sets our fund apart is the caliber of our scholarship recipients. More than 90% of ILA Local 1408 Scholarship Fund recipients graduate from college, and nearly half of them continue their education to earn master's degrees or beyond.

As part of the application process, students submit an essay addressing a maritime industry issue. This gives them the chance to research the supply chain in-depth — from transportation and trucking to trade and logistics — helping them gain a greater understanding of this vast and essential industry.

The goal is to open their minds to the numerous career opportunities available in a sector critical to our local, state and national economies.

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I would like to express my heartfelt appreciation to the ILA Local 1408 membership for their unwavering contributions to the fund over the years. These workers are the backbone of our nation's supply chain and their support has been invaluable in my role as a labor advocate. For that, I am truly grateful.

Reaching the milestone of 30 years is an accomplishment few organizations achieve. To mark this special occasion, we've set an ambitious fundraising goal to award more scholarships than ever before. While economic uncertainty may present challenges, we are determined to ensure that even more students receive the support they need to succeed.

To learn more about getting involved, visit ilascholarshipfund.org/.

Thank you to all our donors over the years for your continued support. Here's to the next 30 years of empowering students and building brighter futures.

Charles Spencer is the founder of the ILA Local 1408 Scholarship Fund. A Jacksonville native, he grew up on the Eastside, just a few blocks from JaxPort, where he began working on the docks in 1963.

This guest column is the opinion of the author and does not necessarily represent the views of the Times-Union. We [welcome a diversity of opinions](#).