

# *Sprouting Opportunities in Rural Oklahoma*

A longtime resident of Coalgate, Oklahoma, Carolyn Watson was proud of her rural Oklahoma roots, but recognized the lack of opportunities presented to residents living in rural communities such as hers.

As chair and CEO of Shamrock Bancshares, Carolyn wanted to improve the quality of life for rural Oklahomans. She established the Carolyn Watson Rural Oklahoma Community Foundation to support classroom grants, community projects and scholarships in rural communities. After her death in 2014, a substantial gift from her estate expanded the programs.

One rural community that has been impacted by Carolyn's generosity is Burns Flat. Located in Washita County, the Western Technology Career Center recently opened a school-based food pantry thanks to a grant awarded to the Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma.

"Many of the students attend school during the day and work long hours at night, and they rarely have extra money for food," said Rodney Bivens, founder of the Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma. "The food pantry is helping close the food gap for these students to ensure they graduate."

Since opening in September 2016, the food pantry has served up to 100 students a month, which is more than 20 percent of the school's enrollment. But the impact is even greater, as the food provided by the pantry also benefits the students' families, reaching up to 300 individuals.

"By coming to the food pantry, I can help out my family," said an 18-year-old student. "My dad isn't working right now, and I'm helping out with food and bills and everything."

Thanks to Carolyn's generosity, her gifts will continue to sprout opportunities throughout rural Oklahoma for years to come.



Shelby Luna (left), Western Technology Career Center student services specialist, helps a student select food from the new pantry.