

KENNEBEC JOURNAL

First Alfond Grant Goes to Waterville Baby

WATERVILLE -- Gabriella May Frain entered the world just two hours into the new year and already she has \$500 saved for her college education.

Gabriella, the second child of Paul and Jocelyn Frain of Waterville and the first child of 2008 born in the region, is the initial recipient of the Harold Alfond College Challenge, a \$500 grant that goes into a special college savings account.

The late Harold Alfond set up the program to help children stand a better chance of affording a college education. The program is limited to children born at MaineGeneral facilities this year but expands to children born at hospitals throughout the state in 2009.

Gabriella's parents, both college graduates, had always envisioned their children obtaining a higher education, but they appreciated the Alfond gift and praised its inspirational value.

"I think it is a good idea," Paul Frain said, "for people who don't have (college) in mind (for their children). It definitely made me think even more about it."

Paul Frain, 33, sat between his wife -- resting in her Thayer Unit hospital bed, nuzzling Gabriella -- and his 6-year-old son, Neo, who worked diligently on a jigsaw puzzle.

Jocelyn Frain, who is pursuing her master's degree in social work at the University of New England, knows full well that any financial boost is helpful when dealing with college costs.

The Financial Authority of Maine, or FAME, projects that over 18 years, the \$500 -- assuming 8 percent annual interest -- would grow to \$2,000.

But add a family contribution of \$50 a month through that same period and that that growth would soar to \$25,000, according to FAME.

"Ideally," 25-year-old Jocelyn Frain said, "we would like that our children not accrue the (education) debt we had. This is actually a huge bonus."

Frain said she would have loved graduating from high school knowing she'd have \$25,000 to apply to college costs.

Paul Frain, a social worker, said he knew about the Alfond grant before coming to the hospital Monday night, although not the specifics of the program.

The Alfond Foundation funded the program with a \$150 million initial contribution from the fortune of the Dexter Shoe founder. Alfond died in November at the age of 93.

When the program goes state-wide in 2009 an estimated 14,000 families will benefit from the grants, amounting to \$7 million in funding. Maine high school graduates, if recent studies are to be believed, need encouragement to enter college.

The latest figures, according to the Sen. George J. Mitchell Scholarship Research Institute in Portland, show that 50 percent of Maine high school graduates pursue college degrees.

This contrasts to 56 percent nationally and 59 percent across New England. The Frains may some day consider those numbers as they check the growth in their daughter's college fund.

But not on Tuesday.

"We're still sort of focused on getting (Gabriella) to eat," Jocelyn Frain said.