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By ROBERT PIERCE

- Leader & Times

Like most days, Susan Roberts was at her job as director of the Liberal Senior Center when she got a surprise, courtesy of a phone call.

That surprise came in the form of a grant from a non-profit foundation which allowed the center to purchase a new vehicle for its Meals on Wheels program.

“They called me one day and asked about the center, what we do,” Roberts said of Education for Kansans. “I told them everything I could think of. The next day, they called and said, ‘We are going to give you \$20,000 for education and for a van for your senior center.’ That was really exciting.”

Roberts and other senior center officials took part of that money to Liberal’s Chrysler Corner where they then traded a 2000 Ford Focus for a 2011 Kia Soul.

With 65 homebound seniors on its Meals on Wheels routes, and 25 alone on the route with the Kia, the vehicle is already coming in handy.

“She used it (Thursday) for the first time,” Roberts said of the Kia’s driver. “Everything went really well.”

Two other vehicles, a 2005 Ford and 2003 Windstar, serve the remaining two drivers on the Meals routes. The senior center also has a newer model, a 2012 Dodge Caravan, used for transportation of seniors.

Roberts said the Kia is a nice addition to the senior center’s fleet of automobiles.

“It really is,” she said. “It’s a great car.”

Roberts said with the Focus, much of the money coming into the center was having to be used for repairs.

“There comes a point where you just have to do something different, but we had no money to buy one,” she said. “When this call came, I couldn’t believe it.”

Roberts said getting the money from Education for Kansans was like an early Christmas present.

“We’re just very thankful for the gift,” she said.

Roberts said both of the other Meals on Wheels current vehicles are doing well at this time.

“The next one to go will probably be the ‘03,” she said. “We have to have a hatchback type vehicle because we load the coolers into the back of it. They’re kind of hard to find.”

In addition to a new vehicle, the money from Education for Kansans will also be used for education for seniors.

“It is earmarked, so we have to use it for those purposes,” she said.

Roberts said she was really surprised to hear from the foundation.

“They just called me on the phone out of the blue,” she said. “That’s why it was such a wonderful thing. The next day, they call me back and said, ‘We’re going to give you \$20,000.’”

The money for senior education can be used for whatever is needed to educate people, according to Roberts.

“It can be a nutrition program,” she said. “We have Kathy Bloom from the K-State office do programs. Anything that’s educational, that’s what we can use the money for.”

Education for Kansans is a non-profit foundation started by Rex Sharp in 2007. Its sole purpose is to give back to the citizens of Kansas to further and promote education.

The foundation has created scholarships, supplemented existing scholarships and donated to debate programs, speech and language programs, senior citizen programs, safety education programs for families with small children, the University of Kansas Medical Center, 4-H clubs and many more education-based organizations.

Sharp is from Southwest Kansas, and his parents still reside in Liberal.

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