

Empowered kids reach out to the community

“Dream it. Do it.”

STORY AND PHOTO BY TARA CUCCHIARA

The youth these days, they are so darn.... smart and responsible? That can be said of the kids and young adults involved in an outreach program run by a joint partnership between the United Way, Ashoka's Youth Venture, and Mount Wachusett Community College's Center for Democracy & Humanity.

“United Way Youth Venture empowers young people to take leadership roles and make a difference in school and the community,” explains Gina Wironen, curriculum facilitator for Leominster Public Schools and district champion for United Way.

Grades 6-12 are eligible to participate in the program. There is no limit to how many members per team and each team has one or two allies, or adult leaders who help facilitate the team. Each team attends a “Dream it. Do it.” workshop to brainstorm ideas. The team's goal is to come up with an action plan to partner with their school or the Leominster community.

Each team is required to devise a budget, vision, goals, fundraising ideas to sustain the venture, partner with community in some aspect, elect team leaders, fill out and submit an application, recruit new members, and present all of this information in front a panel of judges in order to launch the venture. Going to panel is a way for their team to become a recognized venture and to receive up to \$1,000 in grant money to initiate the venture. All of these daunting and involved tasks are student driven and performed. It sounds much like the real business world and yet, it is all being done by 11-18 year olds.



There are currently 24 teams in Leominster; three new teams presented on Nov. 17, at the high school; and three more teams presented on Dec. 8, at Sky View Middle School.

Gina Wironen helps students from Skyview Middle School set up their PowerPoint presentation for United Way Youth Ventures, as one of the panel judges, Meredith Foley, waits in the background.

ARK (Arts for Random Kindness) from the Center for Technical Education was the first to present on Nov. 17. This team's focus is on graphic design and mural painting. Their motto is “The City is our Canvas.” ARK designed flyers and signs for Summer Stroll. They have been commissioned to paint a mural on a building in downtown Fitchburg. ARK is currently working with several non-profits to provide free advertising. Production and supply costs are paid for through fundraising, such as the selling of beads at the football games. One ARK member generously gave each judge a string of beads during the presentation as a nice visual and gesture. This group of highly talented teens is composed of mostly seniors, so a real focus for them is recruiting new members.

The second team to present at the CTE Appleseeds Restaurant was the Walking Around the World Venture from Samoset Middle School. One brave member presented solo, while her school nurse and ally, Susan Avallone looked on. This venture is geared towards leading a healthier lifestyle, while learning more about geography and the various nationalities represented by students at the middle school. Students can sign up to walk before or after school on a set day and chart their mileage. Countries are marked on the walls of the route and each route converts feet into mileage. Students can earn passport stamps when making it to another country. As they reach benchmarks, they will earn gift certificates to restaurants, the mall, the movies, and any other business that donates to the venture. It is a great way to get kids moving, and learning about other cultures, geography, and math.

Last but not least was the Sky View Middle School with their Seeds for Success team. Inspired by a vision of jack-o-lanterns lining the long and winding driveway leading to their school, Seeds for Success was born. This group originally wanted to attain their vision with donations of pumpkins, but due to heavy rains this growing season, the kids found themselves out of luck and out of pumpkins. So they thought, Why not grow our own? But why stop at pumpkins? Seeds for Success proposes to grow vegetables on Sky View property, with the help of local garden shop owner Neil Zanni, and donate the yield to Ginny's Helping Hands.

These students worked really hard on their slideshows and proposals. Despite their nervousness, they got through their presentations exceedingly well. Kumar Raj, U.W.Y.V coordinator and Becca Korduner, U.W.Y.V. AmeriCorps VISTA were both in the audience to monitor and support the students. These three ventures are part of a worldwide program that operates in 19 different countries.

“Empowered young people see that they have a voice. They can see real change come about when they work together. When other kids see what their peers are doing for community, they'll want to join in as well. Success feeds success.” Gina Wironen says with pride. Gina helps students prepare for panel, fill out the application, and continues support once their venture is launched.

Gina Wironen also raves about the support Youth Venture receives from Mount Wachusett College. Fagan Foran makes sure to meet with the students and the college even offers non-credit credentials for college transcripts. Youth Venture is a program that benefits all those involved. It is a learning experience that takes a young person with a good idea and transforms him/her into an empowered member of the community, a viable member who makes change happen.