

Shirley Oracle

Leaders Of Tomorrow Reap Awards Today

By M.E. Jones, Correspondent

Shirley, MA - 05/22/2009 – The United Way Youth Venture program has grown “terrifically” since the “groundbreaking partnership” began in North Central Massachusetts seven years ago, said United Way President Philip Grzewinski.

Since then, hundreds of young citizens have launched creative ventures aimed at fostering positive change in their schools, communities and the world.

Framed within program criteria and with a green light from a panel of judges, Youth Venture projects become vehicles of change with a built-in learning curve.

Whether the focus is to raise funds to build a skate board park, as one Shirley Youth Venture team did, or raise awareness and make a difference as a team from the Parker Charter School at Devens did, student entrepreneurs get back as much as they put into their projects.

Shirley Middle School (SMS) fielded five Youth Venture teams this year, according to library and media director Kathryn Lyon. She initiated the program at SMS and was named “Champion of the Year” for the second time. The local kids took home several awards, too.

Kayla Reeves, of Shirley, a student at the Parker Charter School at Devens, received a “Change-makers” award for her work with “Team Ultimate.” She’s been teaching ultimate Frisbee to inner-city girls.

The Youth Venture team “Skaters of Shirley” (SOS) received an award for building a skateboard park at the Benjamin Hill Recreation area. The award recognizes the project’s benefit to the community and the team’s tenacity in changing public policy.

Team members had to go to the Board of Selectmen, the School Committee and the Benjamin Hill Committee to get their project underway.

Lyon’s “Champion of the Year” award stemmed from her support of 600 students in two schools. She was touted as an example of what it takes to create a culture of change-makers, a key tenet of the Youth Venture program.

Mentored by adult “allies” and with backup from the parent organization that may include seed money, Youth Venture teams work to create and implement a business plan that must be practical as well as visionary. In the process, members develop leadership skills that can help them become tomorrow’s movers and shakers.

Founding Youth Venture team member Katie Roy, of Shirley, is one of them. Her involvement with the program dates to 2002. Now a student at Fitchburg State College, Roy received a leadership award at the “Change Rocks” celebration. Fellow team member Christina Welch-Bird accepted the award for her.