

Several honored by United Way

By Jack Minch

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FITCHBURG -- There are some school days when Elizabeth "Lizzie" Marquis, 13, just wants to be outside instead of in a classroom.

So she and friends came up with the idea of building an outdoor classroom at the Sky View Elementary School in Leominster.

With the help of math teacher Paul Healy, they approached the United Way Youth Venture program asking for money to do the project.

Youth Venture gave her and the rest of her eight-person team the maximum \$1,000 grant to start the project.

The United Way and Youth Venture held a year-end celebration for about 370 students from North Central Massachusetts at the Courtyard by Marriott Fitchburg on Thursday.

It included an awards ceremony, motivational speaker Jeff Yalden of the hit television show MTV MADE, and several break-out conferences on topics such as creating a small business plan, managing a meeting, youth leadership and putting together a so-called elevator speech.

The program was sponsored by United Way of North Central Massachusetts, Mount Wachusett Community College and Ashoka Youth Venture.

"The point is to celebrate the accomplishments of the young people in our region in their efforts not only to create change but to create permanent change in their communities," said Fagan Forham, co-director for Mount Wachusett Community College's Center for Democracy and Humanity.

Venture teams start with an idea and then put together a business plan.

The plan is presented to a United Way board that can approve or reject it.

"It is youth empowering themselves and creating lasting positive change," said Rachel Andler, of Americorps Vista who ran the program the past two years.