

Article published May 10, 2008

Almost 300 volunteers and their parents came to celebrate students' charity work

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NASHUA – Scattered across a few dozen tables the accomplishments of the group assembled read like a how-to book on volunteerism.

Projects of those gathered ranged from those with a local flavor – fixing up a ballpark or downtown center – to those with a more global feel – increasing awareness of alternative energy solutions or raising money to assist child victims of war around the world.

All in all, nearly 300 parents and volunteers came to the Nashua Community College's new Wellness Center on Friday in Nashua to celebrate the work they've done over the past year. The event, the annual United Way-Youth Venture Partnership Celebration, marked the sixth year of the partnership between the two groups, and it was the first time the celebration has been held in the Gate City.

"I was just so amazed by the participants this year," said Lidia Pedro, Youth Venture New England's interim regional director. "I mean I was blown away by last year, but this year, there was such an array of projects that helped to change so many lives and communities around the region. It really never ceases to inspire."

The event kicked off with several student groups sharing their ventures, which included presentations from three local groups: Birthday Wish, a group of six Souhegan High School students who develop party packages for underprivileged families; Pure Water Vending, two Merrimack High School students who are raising money to buy water filtration systems for underdeveloped countries; and Dance Creations, a group of Nashua High School North students who spend time providing free dance lessons for children in the Nashua area.

"We wanted to do something we found enjoyable, that also worked to benefit the community," said Mallory Sullivan, a member of Birthday Wish. "The packages contain everything you need to throw a birthday party and come in different themes for boys and girls.

"The best thing is that we are completely self sustaining now from money we make selling our packages to other families that can afford them," she said.

Held each year in May, the event serves the dual purpose of celebrating students' accomplishments and renewing the energy and vigor of the partnership between the

United Way and Youth Venture. "We really liked what we saw from Youth Venture," said Lisa Conti, director of marketing and communications for the United Way of Greater Nashua. "We saw the program as a great way to engage youths in caring for their communities. After seeing it become so successful, we were thrilled to become partners."

Rather than asking students to volunteer at a shelter or other established organizations, Youth Venture encourages students to find ideas they are passionate about and build them into their own clubs, businesses or organizations, in an effort to stimulate a lifetime of volunteering.

Once students craft an idea and develop a plan, they may receive up to \$1,000 from Youth Venture and the United Way to help launch their organization. Participation can range anywhere from an individual student to a team involving any number of students.

"The main goal of the whole thing is to get kids excited about doing this kind of work," said Pedro. "If they can get their start in an idea that they are passionate about, they're much more likely to continue doing so. We've really seen a lot of these projects blossom over the years."

One such project rests in Shirley, Mass., where Lunenburg High School seniors Kathleen Roy and Christina Welsh still run a venture they created six years ago, when the duo was in seventh-grade. Welsh and Roy were both honored with Longevity Awards for their efforts.

While the Nashua Area may not boast such longevity, having just joined the program in 2006, there are already 14 different ventures within the area that have been approved for funding. Other projects in the area include the Biodiesel Crew in Merrimack, Project T-Shirt Relief in Milford, Rhythm and Rhymes Records at Nashua High School South and Pig Tales of Wilton.

"We only started this two years ago and we're already getting a great response," said Conti. "We're really excited to see how big this can get."

For more information on Youth Venture, visit www.genv.net.

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