

Merrimack teens win \$10k grant

Thursday, January 29, 2009

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MERRIMACK – After winning a \$10,000 grant for their efforts in providing clean water for Third World countries, four Merrimack High School students have big plans for the future.

Jane Starke, Melia Robinson, Noelle Joubert and Julie Phelps impressed a panel of judges with their Pure Water Vending idea at the Best Buy @ 15 Challenge, a competition in which young entrepreneurs put forth their ideas to create change in small or large communities.

It was the first time Best Buy sponsored this competition, in which the top 15 teams out of 30, according to voting tallies, get \$10,000 grants.

"At first, I was like, 'We've got this,' " Starke said after the team peaked in third place. Starke is a senior and president of Pure Water Vending.

With the December ice storm causing power outages, the team dropped out of the top 15, to 19th place. But with the help of Principal Kenneth Johnson, who spoke over the intercom to ask students and teachers to support Pure Water Vending by voting, the team rose back into the top 15.

"It meant a lot to us that we had the support of our school, faculty and staff," Starke said.

After receiving 6,038 votes, they became the eighth-place team, easily qualifying to receive a grant.

"That was the greatest comeback of the century," said Robinson, a senior who's in charge of the marketing for Pure Water Vending.

Youth Venture is leading the global movement with young entrepreneurs who are committed to positive change by developing an idea for a future solution.

In 2006, Youth Venture of New England and United Way of Greater Nashua formed a partnership. United Way-Youth Venture has sponsored 16 teams, each receiving a donation to start their ideas. The program has provided an opportunity for young adults and teens to have a positive impact on communities, or in the case of Pure Water Vending, Third World countries.

"It was an awesome opportunity, because we are helping people on an international level and we don't have to leave our houses," Robinson said.

After making money from selling water out of their vending machine, they donate almost all of the proceeds to Pure Water for the World, keeping only enough to repair the vending machine if broken and for supplies.

Pure Water for the World is an organization dedicated to working with countries that lack clean water, giving the communities information on hygiene and the importance of knowing what's in the water being used and consumed.

"Water is something that people take for granted," Starke said.

The girls say this experience has made them pay more attention to the amount of water they use while they're brushing their teeth and taking showers. With their grant money, they're looking for church groups, Eagle Scout groups, or any other organizations that are willing to be a part of a positive thing and duplicate their idea.

"We want to have different branches, like businesses," Robinson said.

"We want to be like Target," added Joubert, now a freshman at Rivier College who is treasurer of Pure Water Vending.

The vending machine that the four students are in charge of is located inside Broadway Bound Performing Arts Center, a Merrimack studio where Joubert and Starke take dancing lessons. Studio owner Jennifer DeFelice was more than happy to be a part of the change these girls are making.

"It is so wonderful to see teens taking such a serious role in making changes to the world," DeFelice said.

Every \$75 donated is enough to help save lives, because it's enough put a water filter in a home generating water needed for healthy living.

Pure Water Vending's efforts have already helped 13 households. The girls are unsure of what countries they're in, but they know that Pure Water for the World focuses its efforts in countries that need it the most.

With enough support, it will increase the hope of sick children and decrease the number of deaths a day in countries lacking clean water.

Starke, Robinson and Joubert used this experience as topics for their college essays.

"That would have been a good essay," said Phelps, a senior. "Why didn't I think of that?"

Pure Water Vending is planning a party in the near future to celebrate its success. For

more information, e-mail purewatervending@aol.com or go to www.purewatervending.org.