

# The Telegraph

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## **Taking action: Grant initiative helps youths jump-start community projects**

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Fooling around with a video camera is something these guys have done since grade school.

So last spring, when Souhegan High School students Spencer Davis, Pat Gaynor, Dan Nahill and a few of their friends learned a way to turn their hobby into a business, they got rolling.

A new initiative being launched by the United Way of Greater Nashua and a national organization called Youth Venture led the Souhegan students to form a business proposal: They would shoot free commercials for local nonprofit organizations.

A panel from the United Way gave them the nod and some cash, so the group got a name – Rubber Ducky Studios – and poured themselves into the project. They taped and edited a video featuring 80 local businesses for an expo sponsored by the Souhegan Valley Chamber of Commerce, among many other projects. Currently, they're working on a teen-targeted commercial for JobsInNH.com.

Rubber Ducky's larger goal? To become a registered business and eventually, Davis said, conquer Hollywood.

"If we could make a commercial that would land us (on TV during) the Super Bowl, that would be it," Nahill said, a wide grin on his face. Rubber Ducky Studios was made possible by a new partnership between the United Way, which was seeking fresh approaches to helping the community, and Youth Venture, a nationwide organization with offices in Concord that supports youth-generated projects.

For years, the United Way sponsored a day in which hundreds of students at area high schools volunteered around the region, said Lisa Conti, director of marketing and communications. "We wanted to give area youth an opportunity to get involved in some sort of sustainable, community-benefit activity," Conti said. "This organization, Youth Venture, allows kids to do just that." While most donations made in the organization's fundraising campaign will go to 40 social-service agencies in the area, the United Way has pledged up to \$1,000 for each of nine Youth Venture teams now forming at area high schools.

Last spring, Rubber Ducky Studios became a pilot project of the partnership. Davis and the others received \$974 to buy a green screen, microphone, tripod and other

equipment. A second pilot project at Souhegan, "Adaptive Sports," also took off. A group of three students plans to spread the word about "Go Ball," a game that allows all students – including those with visual disabilities – to participate. Their goal is to make "Go Ball" an intramural sport at Souhegan and other schools, said Mike Facques, a social studies teacher who advises the teams.

Other students are beginning to catch on. Last week, a dozen Souhegan freshmen were forming plans to throw birthday parties for disadvantaged kids, sponsor lacrosse camps for children and landscape for the elderly.

At Nashua High North, a pair of students is working on "Teen Tools," which would provide free small-engine repairs – say on lawnmowers and leaf blowers – for the elderly, said Jennifer Bradley, a Spanish teacher and Youth Venture adviser.

And at Nashua South, a student has proposed starting an interpreting service for Latinos in the area, said Nancy Dion, a special-education teacher advising teams there.

"I would say that the youth, particularly teenagers, are really one of the largest untapped resources in our country," Facques said. "They're certainly capable of helping to make a difference, but oftentimes adults don't really believe they can make a difference." Dion agreed, adding Youth Venture provides opportunity for all kinds of students.

"I think you have those students who are your typical leaders in the school, class presidents, Senate leaders, presidents of different clubs," Dion said. "They're amazing young people. . . . But I think there's a larger population of quieter students, students who might get into trouble, even special-education students, who really understand what needs to be done in Nashua, for example. "I think given that responsibility and given that opportunity to make something happen . . . they would surprise a lot of people."