

Teens make a difference through Youth Venture

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NASHUA – Around 300 students from southern New Hampshire and northern Massachusetts who are making a difference in their communities met yesterday at a Youth Venture-United Way conference at Nashua Community College.

One of the teams at the conference was Birthday Wish from Souhegan High School in Amherst.



The six girls got the idea for their charitable endeavor, which puts together packages containing everything a family would need for an underprivileged child's birthday party, after a representative from Youth Venture visited their school in November.

The girls applied for and received money from Youth Venture to start-up their business, which also has a for-

profit side. They sell party packages and hire themselves out to help at parties, then use the money they earn to make more packages to give away.

"Just knowing that we're helping families is the main thing," said Kristin Leffler. "It's hard to imagine kids not having birthday parties."

Mike Facques, a social studies teacher at Souhegan, said Youth Venture's vision fits with the school's philosophy that teens can be change makers and make a difference in their communities.

"They learn they have the power to give back," said Facques. "And they certainly learn other skills because they're basically running a business from start-up."

Gretchen Zucker, executive director of Youth Venture, said the organization started 12 years ago with the idea of cultivating a whole generation of young people who would take the lead on social change.

To be a Youth Venture team, an idea has to go beyond just a one-day event, she said. It also has to have long-term, sustainable benefits for a community. The idea is also to allow the teens to have a life-changing experience that will help them see that they can make a difference.

“If they’re doing this now, imagine what they’re going to be doing ten years from now,” she said.

Lucille Jordan, president of Nashua Community College, is on the board for the United Way of Greater Nashua and is also chair of the local committee for Youth Venture.

In Nashua, where there are teams at both high schools, the idea grew out of the Youth Day of Caring.

“But that was one day, and then it was gone,” said Jordan. Teens wanted to do more, so Youth Venture was brought in.

The college now funds five teams. Jordan sits on the panels that decide which projects get funding.

“To see the work these children do... they have business plans that are so thought out,” she said. “I am so impressed with their work.”

One of the most recent teams funded by Youth Venture is run by three students from Merrimack High School.

Jane Starke, Nouvelle Joubert and Melia Robinson started Pure Water Vending to raise money to send water filters to people in developing countries who don’t have clean drinking water.

They were awarded \$1,000 for their idea, which involves selling water bottles from a vending machine in a dance studio in Merrimack. Money raised from the sales will help them purchase the filters.

Their first vending machine is supposed to arrive next week.

The girls said the conference yesterday helped them get new motivation for their project.

“It’s good to see how other groups are dealing with their struggles,” said Joubert. “It’s also inspiring to see how far you can go.”