

United Way regional program lets youth teams share their ventures

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GARDNER -- Over 100 middle and high school students met in the Chair City Thursday for United Way Youth Venture's Regional Year End Celebration to share programs they created, launched and led to benefit the community.

The ideas presented from 50 teams, representing 15 schools from North Central Massachusetts and southern New Hampshire, were as diverse as the students themselves. They ranged from hosting a senior citizen prom by a team from Gardner High School to creating an environmentally friendly bus in Merrimack, N.H.

"Youth Venture Teams are a powerful way for young people to demonstrate that they have the drive and the initiative to become 'changemakers' in their communities," said Becky Cyganiewicz, coordinator for United Way Youth Venture.

Also on Thursday, Kathryn Lyon of Shirley was awarded "Champion of the Year" for leading the way to successfully incorporate United Way's Youth Venture in the Shirley Middle School. She has been a champion since 2003, and has launched over 12 teams.

"Ally of the Year" was awarded to Maggie Paul of Amherst, N.H. for her outstanding leadership and participation on Souhegan High School's United Way Youth Venture team.

Some of the Venture teams highlighted during the daylong event included the "Environmental Crew Team" from Gardner High School, led by Rebecca McFarland, Mettaya Potter, Jenna LeMieux, Elizabeth Kemp and Aurora Cooper, who held a citywide cleanup.

At Leominster High School, the "Traveling Through the World Team," led by Francis Valladares-Reyes and Thamara Raggi, celebrate cultural diversity by conducting Samba dance lessons, soccer games and ethnic cooking for both students and parents.

Kayla Reeves and Amanda Griffin from the Francis W. Parker Charter School in Devens and their "Team Ultimate" worked with inner-city girls in Worcester to build self-esteem through a game called Ultimate Frisbee.

A team from Shirley Middle School and the Parker School, the "Skaters of Shirley," led by Nick Day, Kim Day, Sam Robinson and Brandon Taylor, are working to open a skate park at Benjamin Hill Park.

Another Gardner High School team, which includes Abigail Goliber, Bonnie Hunter and Emmale Tarra, is holding a senior citizen prom. Fitchburg High School students Alison Joyce and Sarah Laakso helped create "From Crocker to Crocker," an after school track program.

Jessica Andreason, Connie Rowse and Rachel Cassaza from North Middlesex Regional High School's "Fighting Back Team" are using public art to combat teen dating violence.

United Way Youth Venture is a program in eight school systems throughout the region that provides coaching, resources, and seed funding for young people ages 12-20 to create, launch, and lead sustainable community-benefiting ventures.

According to Cyganiewicz, the students use their own talents and interests, and exercise social responsibility and entrepreneurship in finding ways to contribute to their communities. To become a Venturer, they must create an action plan and present their Venture idea to a selection panel of community members.

United Way Youth Venture is active in the Leominster Public Schools, Fitchburg Public Schools, Shirley Middle School, Ayer High School, Gardner High School, North Middlesex High School, Murdock Middle High School, Parker Charter Essential School and North Central Charter Essential School.

United Way Youth Venture is a program of United Way of North Central Massachusetts and Mount Wachusett Community College.