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Bright ideas: Mount Laurel students share research on nonprofits

By Kelly Kultys, staff writer 20 hrs ago

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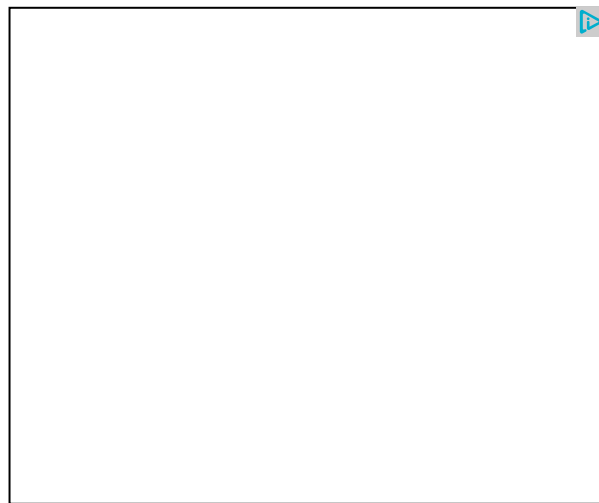
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Daria Torres, board chairwoman of the Giving Cycle, informs representatives from several nonprofit organizations that they will each receive \$500 grant after presentations by the seventh-graders at Thomas E. Harrington Middle School in Mount Laurel on Tuesday, June 14, 2016

MOUNT LAUREL – Carnivals. 5K races. Enhanced websites. Celebrity endorsements. These were just some of the ideas that seventh-graders at the Thomas E. Harrington Middle School shared with local nonprofit organizations on Tuesday morning.

The marketing and promotion strategies came after months of research by the students. They studied the nonprofits, their missions, their websites and their outreach efforts.

On Tuesday, the teams of students in the challenged-based learning class presented their findings to representatives of the nonprofits. For the students' hard work and inspirational ideas, one local nonprofit – created by a student who took the class last year – awarded grants to each organization that partnered with the school.



Eighth-grader Jevon Torres was inspired by the project last year and with his brother, Devin, who is now a fifth-grader at Hartford Upper Elementary School, founded the nonprofit, with the help of their mother, Daria, created the Giving Cycle, which awarded \$500 grants on Tuesday.

The nonprofits included the Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide, Animal Alliance of N.J., Friends of Burlington County Animal Shelter, Operation Yellow Ribbon of South Jersey, Helpful Gifts From the Heart, and Ebo Strong.

Daria Torres said the Giving Cycle works to expand on teacher Kristy Curtis' challenged-based classes and inspire students to get involved in their communities from a young age. Torres teamed with Curtis to bring representatives from the nonprofits to the event so students could share their ideas directly with the groups and causes they spent the last six months studying.

Seventh-grader Emma Colucci said her group chose Ebo Strong because of its local ties and connections to the community.

Ebo Strong was founded in honor of Steven Eric "Ebo" Eberling, of Mount Laurel, who died in 2013 after battling bone cancer for three years. The foundation helps to support families dealing with pediatric cancer, provide assistance to student athletes in the community, and offer college tuition assistance to Lenape High School seniors who possess some of his characteristics.

Emma's team suggested that the organization hold a 5K run/walk to raise awareness and money for the foundation, improve and expand its website, and broaden its scholarship program.

"It was nerve-wracking, but then it felt really good to try to help them," Emma said about presenting in front of the organizations. "We worked really hard putting that together."

Other groups, like the students who presented on the Animal Alliance, a nonprofit animal welfare agency based in Lambertville, suggested their organizations receive an endorsement from a celebrity with local ties, like Carli Lloyd, of Delran, or New Jersey's Jon Bon Jovi.

Many groups cited ideas to help the organizations boost their presence in the community to create awareness of their missions.

"We thought about other nonprofits that are famous and well-known, and tried to copy or imitate what they had done," student Dyonna Wess said.

Dyonna and her three co-presenters, Alexandra Kahn, Kaylynn Leaper and Fionah Gronski, shared their ideas on Helpful Gifts From the Heart.

That organization was founded in Evesham by Debra Defeo Formica, who lost her daughter, Kayla, to leukemia in 2011.

Kayla's long stays in the hospital showed Formica that many parents who have children with cancer need help, especially financially, while they are trying to fight the disease. The organization, created in Kayla's honor, donates "practical gifts" to families, like gift cards for gas or food, to help defray expenses.

The students recommended that Helpful Gifts From the Heart sell merchandise with its brand name to bring in extra money and host a 5K run/walk to raise awareness about the organization.

Curtis said she was very impressed with how hard her students worked and how their presentations came together.

"I'm just so proud of them. I just think they did a tremendous job today," she said.

After the students were done, Torres surprised each group with the \$500 grants. She also surprised Curtis with \$500 from the Giving Cycle to help continue expanding the class.

All of the students took the organization's pledge to continue to help out in their communities, even after class was over.

"I pledge to serve my community in all ways that I can for the rest of my life," the students said as Devin Torres led them in the recitation.

Superintendent George Rafferty said he believes the program will make a real life impact, as it shows how students, no matter their age, can make a difference in the world.

"This has just been phenomenal," Rafferty said. "I'm so proud of you all."