

Up to The Challenge

BY LEANN JUNKER

TRIBUNE REVIEW

High school program pushes students to attain success

Ambition, hard work, dedication and excellence will be rewarded with cash prizes at select area high schools this academic year.

"Is there anyone out there who can use an extra \$250?" Barbara Grandinetti asked in the auditorium at Bentworth High School on a recent school day. She added, "a check made out to you,

in your name, no strings attached."

Grandinetti is executive director of The Challenge Program, which was designed to build a bridge between high school students and the business community by providing incentives to students for successes they achieve while in high school.

Sophomores, juniors and sen-

iors will be rewarded in the following four categories:

- Most improved academically
- Best attendance
- Most community service
- Best overall grade point average

Each winning student receives a check for \$250 for his or her efforts — a total of \$3,000 to

each participating school.

"Everybody sitting here today is eligible for an award," Grandinetti said. "The best part about our program is that students receive awards who never get an award."

According to The Challenge Program Web site www.thechallengeprogram.org, more than \$100,000 was awarded to 386 high

school students in five Pennsylvania counties as well as in Dover, Del., last year.

To mark the expansion of the program into Fayette, Greene, Washington and Allegheny counties, the assembly included a visit from U.S. Rep. John Murtha, who presented a check for \$70,000 on behalf of "defense contractors," or business ambas-

sadors, who sponsor the school.

"I appreciate the opportunity to be here and to participate," Murtha said. "I appreciate these defense contractors coming up with \$70,000 to help forward the program."

Murtha told the students how he's been all over the world, including many poverty-stricken areas.

"You folks have a unique op-

Challenge Program touted

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portunity," he said. "We're so blessed to be born in America — to have the opportunity we have in America, to have the educational opportunities, to have the teachers, the professionals that are teaching all of us."

Murtha quoted his great-grandmother, who he said "was way ahead of her time."

"She said you're put on this earth to make a difference and in this system in America you can make a difference," he said. "This Challenge Program will make a difference, and I appreciate these defense contractors bringing jobs to this area, and I appreciate their participation in this program."

Murtha said one of the things he likes about the program is that it puts the emphasis on local businesses.

"We're trying to bring business back to our area. We're trying to decentralize some of these businesses, so you can stay here," Murtha said.

The founder of The Challenge Program, Daniel T. Perkins, approached Murtha about four years ago with his concerns of helping young people.

"He said we need to help these young people, we need to challenge them, we need to give them something to work for that's not necessarily in the academic field, like attendance and things like that," Murtha said. "This is an impressive thing."

Murtha said Perkins worked for him when he was just 12 years old.

Perkins, who is the owner and CEO of MTS Technologies, said: "I knew him when he was a businessman, and he knew me when I was a little kid, and he was always telling me if you work hard and you believe in what you're doing, you can accomplish great things."

Calling Murtha his mentor, Perkins encouraged the students to find a mentor of their own, but if that doesn't happen "motivate yourself. Convince yourself that whatever you want to do, you can achieve it and you will."

"If I leave any message today it's to tell you to work hard, strive for what you want to do and you will accomplish it," Perkins said. "Don't believe because you're from a small town in a small area that you can't grow to national presence. You can. You really can. You just have to keep pushing. My mentor convinced me of that and he pushed me at times."



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Daniel T. Perkins, founder of The Challenge Program, talks to students at Bentworth High School.

Perkins started The Challenge Program at Bishop McCort High School in the 2003-04 school year.

"I'm really proud of The Challenge Program. We started at one school, then we went to 15, then we went to 30 schools. This year we're probably going to do up to 80 schools," Perkins said.

The program is now under way at Charleroi Area and Bentworth high schools in Washington County. Fayette County participants are Albert Gallatin Area, Brownsville Area, Connellsville Area, Fayette County Vocational Technical School, Frazier, Geibel Catholic, Laurel Highlands and Uniontown Area high schools. Greene County schools are Carmichaels Area, Mapletown and Waynesburg Central high schools.

Each school has a business ambassador that funds the awards. At Charleroi Area and Bentworth, that business is Progeny Systems.

Walt Kitonis, president and CEO of Progeny Systems, also spoke to the students, telling them he grew up poor and on welfare, moving around from one school to another.

"I thought when people had orange juice in their refrigerator they were rich because that was something you don't really need to have," Kitonis said.

Kitonis also revealed that he came from a broken family.

"I didn't know my father when I was little. He left when I was 2," Kitonis said. "I graduated from high school when the steel mills were closing down. There were

no jobs and it wasn't looking very good. And on top of all that my girlfriend — she got pregnant."

Kitonis said it looked like he was going to live the same kind of life he had come from until his girlfriend's father took him under his wing and insisted he go to college.

"I went to college and did the right thing, and I came back home and I said now I need to find a job, and there were no jobs here," he recalled. "Things were closing down and the area was depressed, so I had to move away and that's the thing that gets me."

Kitonis, who remains married to the same woman, said they were away for 10 years before they could get back to southwestern Pennsylvania.

"My wife and I came back to try and help the community," he said.

"I'm here to encourage you to go for higher education. People with a college education usually make \$1 million more in their lifetime. I'm here to show you, by example, what's possible if you really, really want it," he said.

He imparted some advice on the youngsters as well, giving them the keys to his success — commitment, responsibility, humility, hard work, a lifelong passion for learning, setting goals and enabling others to succeed.

"It doesn't cost anything to be nice," he said. "I encourage you today to take the challenge and do your best and start thinking about the rest of your life right now."