

Money serves to 'Challenge' area students

BY DAVID HURST

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A Cambria County nonprofit is trying to show students that hard work pays, literally.

Students in more than 70 schools this year had the chance to participate in The Challenge Program's growing incentive initiative, offering \$250 rewards to high school students who volunteer the most community service or have the best attendance, best grades or most improved ones.

The Johnstown-based group's founders said they're trying to motivate the region's students — and reward them for a job well done.

And the check is a school-age version of the working world's performance bonus, said Dan T. Perkins, chief executive officer of MTS Technologies Inc. and co-founder of the program.

"We want to challenge them to do their best," Perkins said. "But we also want to show them that there are opportunities in this region and that they can be the next success story."

The program started as a challenge to Bishop McCort students in 2003, he said.

Perkins grew up in Johnstown, where his steelworker father taught him that if he wanted more than his small weekly allowance, he would have to earn it.



Mirror photo by Patrick Waksmunski

Amanda Kegley receives her Challenge award Friday at Central Cambria High School.

He started shining shoes and eventually got permission to set up his shine box outside the Minute Car Wash on Somerset Street.

The owner told him it wasn't a problem as long as he wasn't holding up customers, which would mean he would need to shine the shoes in a minute.

"So I got a buddy and I paid him a quarter an hour to shine the other foot," Perkins said.

The business thrived and got the car wash owner's attention, eventually landing Perkins a job there.

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"He pushed me to reach higher ... achieve more," Perkins said.

The owner was now U.S. Rep. John P. Murtha, D-12th District, who suggested Perkins follow his footsteps into the Marines.

Today, Perkins owns and runs Arlington, Va.-based contractor MTS, which has a major office in Johnstown.

Over the years, he has learned that success stories like his are more common than not.

Despite the average teen's opinion, Perkins said most who rise to high-level company positions aren't born into it — they get there through hard work and often humble roots.



Through the Challenge Program, local businesses "adopt" a school annually, with a representative coming in to tell students about their path to success.

At the end of the year, the business' sponsorship — typically \$3,000 — is handed out to students in award money — \$1,000 for top 10th-, 11th- and 12th-grade students in each field, said Bar-

bara A. Grandinetti, the program's director and co-founder.

"We hope all of these students continue to pursue the ideals this program pushes," said Becky Styles, president and general manager of Johnstown-based contractor Lockheed Martin AeroParts Inc., which has been a sponsor for three years.

"Hard work. Attendance. The drive to improve. We look for employees who exhibit the characteristics the Challenge Program promotes," Styles said.

Styles helped hand out awards at an Admiral Peary Vo-Tech ceremony Friday.

Bob Price, a 17-year-old senior at the school, walked

away \$250 richer.

Although "a little surprised" his grades were the most improved in his class, the lesson behind it apparently sunk in.

He's investing the check in his future — a set of hospital "scrubs" and textbooks.

A student in Admiral Peary's health assisting program, Price of Twin Rocks will head to Allegany College of Maryland in August with the dream of becoming a registered nurse.

"It probably won't last too long," he said of the check. "It'll be put to good use."

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Mirror photo by Patrick Waksman

Bob Price, a student at Admiral Peary Vo-Tech School, examines his Challenge award for most-improved grades Friday during the awards program.