

Program aims to stop 'brain drain'

Top-notch students earn rewards and learn about local jobs.

BY MARY PICKELS
TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Kayla Pongrac likes volunteering. The senior at Shade-Central City High School in Somerset County has helped the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society's Light the Night Walk, Habitat for Humanity and the Humane Society of Somerset County.

Two years ago, she joined the Challenge Program, a nonprofit organization that matches high schools with business partners who contribute financial rewards to deserving students.

"The awards don't just go to jocks or popular kids," said Pongrac, 17. "Everyone has a chance. It's given me so many opportunities."

It's also given her \$500 so far as a two-time winner for community service.

Pongrac, who hopes to study journalism and creative writing, stashed half her winnings in a college savings account and put the rest toward a laptop computer.

At a Challenge breakfast meeting, a local newspaper editor learned of her writing ability and asked her to contribute a regular column for *The Daily American* in Somerset.

Stop the 'brain drain'

Challenge Program founder and Johnstown native Daniel T. Perkins came from humble beginnings, but now heads his own company, MTS Technologies Inc. The Virginia-based company, which has a Johnstown office, provides business and management consulting, engineering, logistics, information technologies and systems analysis.

Perkins created the Challenge Program as a way to discourage the exodus of young people from their home communities.

The initiative to both entice and reward particularly noteworthy high school students began in the 2003-04 school year in Cambria County.

"The interest just grew overnight," Perkins said. "We hope to take it national."

In the 2006-07 school year, 72 schools participated, with 864 students winning prizes of \$250 each.

One of them is Tyler Doppelheuer, 16, a junior at Connellsville Area High School in Fayette County, who won two awards in his sophomore year. He earned \$500 for highest grade-point average and community service.

He has raised funds to improve the city's Austin Park, coached Special Olympics events, rung a bell for the Salvation Army and regularly holds cleanup sessions at Yough River Park. He recently convinced a local greenhouse to donate 17 flats of flowers for the bike trail.

When he learned that he could win money for his community service, he decided to get more organized.

"I try to encourage people my age," said Doppelheuer, who plans to enter politics after college and law school.

He donated a portion of his winnings to the Austin Park project, and banked the rest for college.



GUY WATHEN/TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Tyler Doppelheuer, 16, a Connellsville Area High School junior, helped to plant these flower beds along Third St. in Connellsville.

BRAIN DRAIN • FROM C1

Program gains ground

Students in 10th, 11th and 12th grades in participating schools in Pennsylvania and Delaware can qualify in the categories of most improved academically, best attendance, most community service and best overall grade-point average.

Regionally, the nonprofit program includes schools in Armstrong, Blair, Cambria, Fayette, Greene, Indiana, Somerset and Washington counties.

Seven Westmoreland County schools recently signed on: Hempfield Area High School, Greater Latrobe High School, Mt. Pleasant Area Junior/Senior High School, Laurel Valley Middle/High School, Ligonier Valley High School, Burrell High School and Central Westmoreland Career Technology Center.

Challenge President Donato B. Zucco and executive director Barbara Grandinetti said they hope to include all Westmoreland County schools by fall.

Mary Dreliszak, manager of program development, said the program is in talks with Allegheny County districts as well, and hopes to include those schools by the 2008-09 school year.

Last year, Pennsylvania Secretary of Education Gerald L. Zahorchak endorsed the program as "a proven success in motivating students to perform well in school by providing incentives for academic achievement and community service. In the process, the program builds a bridge between local high school students and the business community that helps reverse the 'brain drain' in Pennsylvania."

Local businesses agree to

serve as ambassadors, providing the \$3,000 per school in awards, and speaking to students about business and job opportunities in their communities.

"One of the best investments they make is that they get to see the payback," Zucco said.

The business ambassadors' goal, Grandinetti said, is to convince students that opportunities exist in their own communities.

Krista Myers, spokeswoman for L. Robert Kimball & Associates Inc. in Ebensburg in Cambria County, said the company has been a sponsor at Central Cambria High School in Ebensburg for several years.

"It helps us to communicate to students that there are career opportunities in this area. It's good leverage to keep kids here," she said. "Another reason is it's a good incentive program, a way of recognizing kids for doing well."

Eric Burkley, a guidance counselor with Greater Latrobe High School, was familiar with the program through his former position with the Ferndale Area School District in Cambria County.

The program emphasizes the qualities employers seek out, he said.

"Regardless of where you're looking to work," he said, "attendance is important, performance is important."

The school's business ambassador is Idlewild & Soak Zone in Ligonier Township, which employs many of the district's students. The park also sponsors Hempfield and Mt. Pleasant area school districts, according to Challenge officials.

Mary Pickels can be reached at mpickels@tribweb.com or 724-836-5401.