

Entrepreneurs 'challenge' students to achieve

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Ed Kilkeary fondly recalls getting the support that helped him take flight in life.

Kilkeary — founder, president and chief operating officer of L.J. Aviation in Unity — has now become the supporter as a local sponsor of the Johnstown-based Challenge Program Inc., a nonprofit group which is currently working to reward goal-achieving students at Ligonier Valley High School.

In 1980, Kilkeary wanted to start his business by buying a used Learjet 25 from noted Pittsburgh businessman and philanthropist, Henry Hillman.

With the craft in dire need of a new paint job and interior work, Kilkeary said, Hillman allowed him more than a month to complete the upgrades necessary to start operating the business and build much-needed capital before requesting the roughly \$1 million fee.

"I still see Mr. Hillman all the time; I think he takes a little glint of pride in the fact that I succeeded," said Kilkeary, 60. "He just gave a young guy a chance."

Kilkeary shared such stories Tuesday with Ligonier High students at an orientation for The Challenge Program.

Started in 2003 by businessman Daniel

Perkins, the program has partnered local businesses like L.J. Aviation, The Sewickley Spa, The Rolling Rock Club, and Markosky Engineering Group with high schools and provides financial incentives to students for successes they achieve while at Ligonier Valley.

It is designed to challenge 10th-, 11th-, and 12th-grade students to excel in one of four categories — best attendance; most community service hours; best grade point average, and most improved grades in each respective class, said Linda Hammers, senior manager of program development. Four students from each of grade will receive a \$250 check, a total of 12 awards per school, when winners are announced in spring, Hammers said.

"I thought Ed (Kilkeary) was a great fit to talk with these students," Hammers said. "He'll be back in the spring to hand a student winner a check."

This school year, about 100 schools statewide are participating in the program, including six others in Westmoreland County — Greater Latrobe Area Senior High, Mount Pleasant Area High, and Hempfield Area High, all of which are sponsored by Idlewild Park; Jeannette High, sponsored by the Jeannette Umbrella Group; Greensburg-Salem High, sponsored by

Sylvan Learning Center and CCL Technologies, and Norwin High, sponsored by PDS Industries and Penn State Tool & Die, Hammers said.

Norwin High sophomore Greg Hollinger spent last summer racking up more than 17 community service hours with the North Huntingdon Rotary Club and the township recreation board. He plans to continue piling up his volunteer time leading up to spring in hopes of winning a program award.

"That money would help me a lot in buying books when I go to college," Hollinger said.

Dorothy Andreas-Tuel — The Sewickley Spa founder — supports the program's backing of students who try living and working in western Pennsylvania as they grow.

"The more ownership we take in our communities, the more pride people have in working in that culture," Andreas-Tuel said.

The Challenge Program Inc. is still seeking sponsors to fund the program for students at Laurel Valley Middle/High School, Central and Eastern Westmoreland Career and Technology Centers, and Burrell High School, Hammers said.

Those interested can contact The Challenge Program at 724-875-2528. For online information, access www.thechallengeprogram.org.