

Program offers incentive for hard work by students

For the past two years, Stephanie Buncich, a senior at Conemaugh Township High School, has fallen just short of winning The Challenge Program Inc.'s Most Community Service Award.

Buncich, who serves on TCP's Student Advisory Board, has completed more than 450 hours of community service as a mentor to two individuals through the Outdoor Odyssey Program.

Outdoor Odyssey is a non-profit that pairs campers with student mentors and places them in a weeklong wilderness experience together.

The session encourages leadership and team-building among participants through a series of adventurous challenges.

Following the weeklong session, mentors are expected to engage campers in monthly activities and to communicate with them on a regular basis for one year.

Buncich said that her experience with Outdoor Odyssey thus far has taught her the values of patience and acceptance.

"(One time) my camper was climbing our rock wall at camp. She was afraid to keep climbing, but with my patience and the support of a few counselors and fellow



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mentors, she reached her goal and was very proud of herself (for achieving it)."

Despite never having received a check from TCP for her efforts, Buncich said that her service to the community has been rewarding in other ways:

"It (community service) teaches me to be more thankful for what I have," she said.

"It's also gratifying to see how appreciative your campers are of your service."

Buncich encourages other students to see the rewards that community service and academic improvement bring for students, even if they do not result in a check from The Challenge Program Inc.

"Although it is disappointing to fall short of your goal, (it's important to) look at what you accomplished while striving for what you wanted," she said.

"As a result of The Challenge

Program, many students have improved or kept up their GPA, attended school more, or helped out more in their community - without receiving a \$250 check.

"Those individuals have learned to work hard at something, and they'll be able to use that work ethic throughout their lives."

Still, Buncich said that she would be grateful to receive TCP's Community Service Award as an "additional reward" for her efforts. She plans on submitting her community hours to her guidance counselor to be considered for the award again at the end of the year.

"They (the students that win awards) seem so excited," said Buncich. "It would be an honor to win."

The Challenge Program Inc. is a nonprofit organization headquartered in Johnstown that provides financial incentives to students for successes they achieve while still in high school. The program awards students in the areas of highest grade-point average, best attendance, most community service and most improved. The program also aims to provide a bridge between high school students and the local business community.