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Souderton Area, Dock Academy, high school students honored for community service

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FRANCONIA >> Olivia Basile started when she was in fourth grade.

“I knew that I wanted to help people,” the now ninth-grader at Souderton Area High School said. “I didn’t know what I wanted to do, but I knew that I wanted to help.”

After talking to her mother about it, she came up with the idea of Kids Collecting Canned Goods, collecting food and monetary donations for Keystone Opportunity Center.

The most successful of the collections was in August of this year, when KCCG collected about 1,300 pounds of food and \$150 at Wal-Mart in Harleysville, she said. The most recent one was Dec. 4, also at the Harleysville Wal-Mart, when about 870 pounds of food and \$250 was collected, she said.

Amber Clemens, a 12th-grader at Dock Mennonite Academy, said she’s been involved in several service opportunities during her high school years.

“Some have taken me far from my home and comfort to places like Costa Rica while others were close and yet stretched me in ways I could not have imagined,” Clemens said.

As a volunteer with the Shining Stars program at Franconia Mennonite Church, she works with autistic children, an experience that has been humbling and given her a new perspective as she sees how hard they work to do things others take for granted, she said.

“I know that I will continue to find ways to serve those in my community because these experiences have helped shape me and opened my eyes to the needs around me,” Clemens said.

Basile and Clemens are two of this year’s six Indian Valley Chamber of Commerce Student Community Service Award honorees, who outlined their service during the awards presentation at the Chamber’s Dec. 14 luncheon at Indian Valley Country Club.

“The Student Community Service Award, an initiative of the Chamber’s Education Committee, was created to recognize students for their outstanding contributions to society through significant community service. This award serves the dual purpose of recognizing such contributions and

providing role models for other students and our community at large,” according to Chamber information.

“I think this is one of our favorite meetings of the year because we get a chance to recognize our wonderful youth in the community and the things that they’ve done,” Education Committee Chairwoman Ellen Jamison said. “I’m always impressed when we get their resumes and review them on how much the youth are doing today and how involved they are in the community.”

Cameron Hart, a 12th-grader at Souderton Area High School, organized a health day at Indian Valley Boys & Girls Club.

“I did this because I didn’t want our generation to be remembered as the one that focused too much on electronics, TV, that kind of thing,” he said.

The students were taught about the 5-2-1-0 plan, he said.

“For those of you who do not know what this means, it simply states five or more servings of fruits or veggies everyday, two hours or less of screen time every day, one hour or more of strenuous activity,” Hart said, “and, finally, zero sugary drinks, period.”

To help illustrate, the presentation included showing the students fun games and how much sugar is in various drinks, he said.

Responses ranged from children who said they wanted to lick the sugar off the table to one who said she would never again drink a sugary drink.

“It’s probably unlikely that she’ll cut it out completely, but that wasn’t our goal,” Hart said. “Our goal was just to raise awareness.”

Makenna Kregel, an 11th-grader at Souderton Area High School, was another of the honorees.

“My passion is working with students with special needs. I’ve loved that since I was in kindergarten,” she said.

That has included taking part in Joni and Friends programs, working with Bridge Disabilities Ministries at her church and a soccer program for kids who would not normally have the chance to be in soccer, she said.

Kregel also created Souderton INC (Indians Navigating the Community), a club for special-needs students at the high school.

“The goal is to integrate these students into the community. A lot of times, they get overshadowed. They’re not invited to go places. They’re not asked to go to the mall with their friends and spend time together,” Kregel said.

The club activities include holiday shopping trips and attending school athletic competitions, she said.

“This club allows these students to create friends and be in a friendly environment where they’re not gonna feel judged,” Kregel said.

Michael Pagan, a 12th-grader at Souderton Area High School, said his family vacations on the eastern shore of Virginia in the Chesapeake Bay area, where there is also a large population of migrant farm workers who come each summer to pick crops.

“I noticed the difference between the way I lived, vacationing in this area, and the impoverished lives of these migrant workers, so I decided something needed to be done to try and reconcile the differences between our lives,” Pagan said.

He held a collection that received more than 800 items that were distributed to the migrants, he said. It also received \$300 of donations that were used to purchase dental supplies, such as toothbrushes and toothpaste, for the migrants, he said.

In future years, he’d like to expand the project, particularly in helping with dental health, he said.

One of the things he’s already learned is the impact the service can have, he said.

“Even if you do a rather small scale project for a very large population, it still can have a big impact,” Pagan said, “and as a result, I think my service will be a larger part of my life in the future.”

Katie Wittig, a 12-grader at Souderton Area High School, is the liaison between the school’s student council and Firely Pediatric Services, a home for medically-fragile children in Harleysville.

“Working at the home and personally caring for the children and their families has strengthened my concern for the health and happiness of other people, rather than just myself,” Wittig said.

The experience, combined with her interest in biochemistry, is leading toward a career in health care and the sciences, she said.

“It was intimidating to take on this responsibility in my early high school years, but it turned out to be one of the most rewarding experiences I have ever had,” Wittig wrote in information for the award. “It opened my eyes to the needs of children with disabilities in my community, and how, despite their struggles, they can flourish like so many of us have growing up in this area.”

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