

New Jersey youths named semi-finalists in national recognition program

Katie Zeidman • Reader Submitted • April 27, 2010

CENTRAL JERSEY — Five New Jersey teens have been named semi-finalists in the 2010 search for Huggable Heroes. They are five of 75 young leaders recognized, honored and cele-bear-ated by Build A-Bear Workshop for helping make their communities and the world a better place.

Shannon McNamara, 16, founded SHARE, (SHannon's After-school Reading Exchange) a nonprofit organization dedicated to empowering African girls through education. She has traveled to Tanzania to teach English to the SHARE girls and open new after-school reading rooms. SHARE renovates deteriorated classrooms, creates school libraries, and employs teachers. Shannon gives presentations to mobilize students to hold fundraisers and book drives, enabling SHARE to ship donated children's books and school supplies to Tanzania. Today, 150 SHARE girls meet 6 times each week to become literate and help themselves out of poverty. To date, SHARE has raised \$80,000, and built three school libraries equipped with 21,000 books for 2,500 students and 35 teachers.

Paula Pilipovic, 17, co-founded HelplightNJ which raises funds to buy energy efficient light bulbs for low-income and senior citizens in an attempt to reduce energy consumption and lower electrical bill costs. She is responsible for organizing light bulb distributions in senior centers and housing authorities all over New Jersey and educates citizens about clean energy and proper recycling methods for the light bulbs, as well as about the potential savings. Paula also personally coordinates a team of 10 other partner high schools and helps them set up distributions across the state in an effort to promote clean energy education. So far, HelplightNJ has given away more than 150,000 light bulbs to a total of 25,000 families throughout all of New Jersey. In addition, they have saved state residences more than \$15 million off of their electrical bills and help save 117 million pounds in CO2 emissions which is equivalent to 10,000 cars off the roads.

Mike Ruane, 18, and his cousin, Erika Rech, 18, are the co-founders of Breast Friends Forever, which raises money for women and families struggling with breast cancer. To help raise money for their cause, they sell their own t-shirt and bracelet creations, as well as hold a black tie gala. To date, they have raised more than \$110,000 which is used to buy such items as gas cards, groceries, help with electric and gas bills and medical co-pays. They plan to double that in 2010.

Stephen Toledo, 14, visits children in local hospitals to give gifts, toys and entertainment. He manages all facets of fundraising, collection and distribution of the donated items. In addition, he expanded his mission to include helping those in his community in need. Stephen has organized a baby car seat drive, bike helmet drive and used clothing drive. He has donated over 200 pairs of socks and over 30 bags of stuffed animals. So far, he has raised more than \$25,000, plus collected thousands of toys, food, blankets, car seats, bike helmets, socks and books to help those less fortunate.

Ultimately 10 Huggable Heroes will be selected. Each will receive \$10,000 (a \$7,500 educational scholarship and \$2,500 from the Build-A-Bear Workshop Foundation to be donated to the 501(c)(3) charity of the Huggable Hero's choice). In addition, the Huggable Heroes will win a trip for themselves and a parent/guardian to St. Louis, home of the Build-A-Bear Workshop World Bearquarters. During their visit, they will have the opportunity to meet each other, participate in leadership opportunities and be honored for their good deeds.

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