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Kids Learn About U.S. to Aid Military Families

By Samantha L. Quigley/AFPS

FALLS CHURCH, Va., Feb. 23, 2007 - Rachel and Kelsi Okun kicked off their organization's second treasure hunt today to raise scholarship funds for military children and spouses with the help of their classmates at Haycock Elementary School here.

"Treasure Hunt Aiding Needs of Kids and Spouses of those serving the United States of America," or ThanksUSA, is a member of America Supports You. The Defense Department program highlights the ways Americans are supporting the nation's servicemembers.

Rachel and Kelsi, 11 and 8, respectively, founded the organization in August 2005 after being inspired by two documents. The first was a letter from troops in response to care packages Rachel's Brownie troop had sent. The second piece of inspiration came from Michael Stadther's book, "A Treasure Trove."

"(The troops) gave us a letter and it said, 'The thing that keeps us going through the dirt and dust is that we have a free country, and that's what we're fighting for,'" Kelsi said. "We said, 'OK. We can put these two together. So why don't we make a treasure hunt that gives out scholarships for the troops?'"

The girls also encouraged the students, teachers and parents gathered in the school's gym to participate in the hunt for answers to American history and trivia by enticing them with sample questions. Student who answered the questions correctly received small prizes.

Last year's hunt, which also centered on facts about the country, was expected to be a one-time event, Jeri Thomson, the organization's president said after the assembly.

"It started out to be a one-time family project, but last summer everybody sort of realized that there is a real need here," she said. "It's a very carefully defined niche now; scholarships for spouses and kids of active duty troops, defined so it includes Guard and reserves."

So this year the girls, who spent about a year creating their first treasure hunt with friends, family and teachers, decided to create another, and they had even more help. In addition to parents, teachers and friends, Rachel's Junior Girl Scout Troop and Kelsi's third-grade class got involved, each creating a chapter for the clue book.

"Treasure hunts, they take a lot of work," Rachel told those assembled in the gym. "But they're so rewarding."

Even the girls' puppy pal, Miles, played his part. "He's just a really good 'pound hound,'" Kelsi said. "So we decided, 'Why don't we make him the star of one of our chapters? He can hunt clues.'"

The contest is free to anyone who wants to participate, but the girls are hoping for generous donations to fund their scholarships. Last year, donations from the treasure hunt totaled more than \$500,000, which helped fund more than 100 scholarships, Kelsi said, adding that they hope that amount will be even greater this year.

Just as great as the donations received are the thank you notes from scholarship recipients, Jeri Thomson, the organization's president,



Rachel Okun, 11, (left) and her sister, Kelsi, 8, take turns answering classmates' questions, which were designed to explain their ThanksUSA organization and the second national treasure hunt, during an assembly at their school, Haycock Elementary in Falls Church, Va., on Feb. 23. Samantha L. Quigley



Third-grade students from Haycock Elementary School in Falls Church, Va., helped their classmate, Kelsi Okun, and her fifth-grade sister, Rachel, kick off ThanksUSA's second treasure hunt Feb. 23. The Okun girls founded ThanksUSA to thank servicemembers for their service to the country. Samantha L. Quigley

said. One military spouse who received a scholarship wrote: "(I) just wanted to let you know that your scholarship has helped so, so much. When I get my degree, I promise I will return the favor in donating back to ThanksUSA to give other students."

Her mother, Deanna Okun, said there are suggestions for fund-raisers on the ThanksUSA Web site if classes should want to make a donation to the scholarship fund.

The focus of this year's treasure hunt is still on America, Rachel said. "Our country is so special. So this year our treasure hunt is about the pillars of democracy ... like the Bill of Rights (and) the Declaration of Independence," she said. "We wanted to focus on what makes our country so great."

But because the girls are trying to engage school children, the Okuns added a new element to the hunt, which should make teachers happy too, Deanna said.

"This year we've made it consistent with standards of learning for social studies and history," Deanna said. "Sixty percent of the questions in each chapter are consistent with those standards."

This is a huge plus for teachers, because it helps them develop the skills their students need to be working on anyway, Danylchuk said. "I need to get them to cite references and also (improve) their research skills," she said. "So it kind of killed two birds with one stone."

The assembly, which had begun with the Pledge of Allegiance, also included the airing of a ThanksUSA public service announcement. That announcement encourages doing more than presenting returning servicemembers with a medal and a pat on the back. "If you think our troops deserve more than that, make a donation to our scholarship fund," the announcement said.

To find out how to participate in the second ThanksUSA Treasure Hunt, visit the ThanksUSA Web site. The contest is broken into three phases, with Phase 1 open to any kindergarten through 12th-grade class. Phases 2 and 3 are open to individuals. Prizes will be awarded for correct answers in accordance with official rules.