

## ThanksUSA Kicks Off Second Treasure Hunt

Charity launches second national treasure hunt with event at Haycock Elementary School.

By Aranya Tomseth  
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During a family vacation in the summer of 2005, Franklin Sherman Elementary School students Kelsi and Rachel Okun told their parents that they thought it would be fun to create a national treasure hunt. The two sisters never imagined that their summer vacation musings would evolve into a national charity program that would award \$3.5 million in scholarship funds to 1,000 spouses and dependents of American troops serving in the Middle East.

"It just goes to show that when you put your mind to something, you can make anything happen," said Rachel, 11.

The girls' parents, Bob and Deanna Okun, were supportive when their daughters brought up the idea of a national treasure hunt. They urged the girls to think of how their treasure hunt could benefit the greater good. Kelsi and Rachel brainstormed, and finally decided that they would want their treasure hunt to inspire people to donate to a scholarship fund for families of American military personnel currently serving in the Middle East.

"Our troops give us the power to be who we want to be by letting us have the freedom to go to school, and we wanted to give them that same power, and voila — ThanksUSA was born," said Rachel.

ThanksUSA — an acronym for Treasure Hunt Aiding Needs of Kids (and Spouses) of those Serving the United States of America — is a non-profit, non-partisan organization that was awarded federal funds and incorporated in Washington D.C. in the fall of 2005. Once ThanksUSA was established, Kelsi and Rachel set to the task of creating a national treasure hunt. Working with their parents, neighbors, family friends and their Franklin Sherman Elementary School teacher Carolyn Ferek, the girls were able to design a 12-chapter book of clues for their national treasure hunt. Each chapter focused on a particular state, and contained trivia questions and puzzles to guide treasure hunt participants toward answers.

"It started with Mrs. Ferek and our family, and then we had 14 people sitting around our dining room table every Sunday afternoon," said Kelsi, 9.

"The Hunt" officially kicked off in May of 2006 and ended the following September. Kelsi and Rachel hoped that in addition to providing people with a fun, summer family activity, the treasure hunt would also draw attention to the ThanksUSA scholarship charity. The girls' dreams came to fruition — when the treasure hunt ended, ThanksUSA was able to award \$3.5 million in scholarship money to 1,000 recipients from all 50 states.

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For more information on ThanksUSA and the ThanksUSA 2007 national treasure hunt, or to make an on-line donation, visit [www.thanksusa.org](http://www.thanksusa.org). To mail a donation, send a check to ThanksUSA, 1390 Chain Bridge Road, #260, McLean, VA 22101. All donations are tax-deductible.



Photo by Aranya Tomseth/The Connection  
Rachel and Kelsi Okun answer questions about the ThanksUSA program from students at Haycock Elementary School.

"My favorite thing was getting the letters back from the scholarship recipients," said Rachel. "It's amazing what those letters contain. We got over 700 hand-written letters, which was really fabulous — it's a really powerful experience, and we had a lot of crying, but it just makes everything so wonderful and so rewarding."

During the 2006 ThanksUSA national treasure hunt, Kelsi and Rachel Okun had the opportunity to enjoy a variety of exciting experiences. The sisters appeared on several news shows, including "The Today Show" and "Good Morning America." They also watched the filming of a donated public service announcement and went before the U.S. Congress to ask for federal funding.

GIVEN THE SUCCESS of the program, it is not surprising that the girls decided to do it all over again in 2007. On Friday morning, Feb. 23, at Haycock Elementary School, Kelsi and Rachel helped lead a kick-off celebration for the second ThanksUSA National Treasure Hunt. This year's hunt will run until Sept. 4 and, like last year's, will feature a number of donated prizes. This year's prizes focus on education and technology, and include items such as iPods, digital cameras, computers and more. The prizes will be awarded in three different phases. Phase I winners will be drawn from classroom entries, Phase 2 winners will be drawn from individual entries, and in Phase 3, another winner per chapter will be drawn, as well as a grand prize winner from the individual entries.

"This year's theme is the Pillars of Democracy because the Pillars of Democracy are what hold our country up," said Rachel at last week's kick-off event.

The questions in this year's treasure hunt focus on the histories of Arizona, Connecticut, Illinois, Massachusetts, Michigan, North Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Virginia and Washington.

"Treasure hunts take a lot of work, but they're so rewarding," said Rachel. "Our country is so special... it really is a great, great place to live in."

IN ADDITION to the 12 chapters dedicated to each of these states, this year's book features an extra "for kids, by kids" chapter that tests participants' knowledge about each of the states, and includes significant quotes about America. The extra chapter was created by Kelsi's third grade Gifted and Talented class at Haycock Elementary School.

"The kids were paired up, and they each had a state that they kind of chose, so we ended up doing eight states in total," said Jennifer Danylchuk, who teaches the class.

Danylchuk said her class started working on the project in September and finished just before the winter break. She added that the best aspect of the exercise was that the students had fun while simultaneously learning a great deal about American history.

"About 60 percent of the standards were met for the social studies curriculum in the treasure hunt," said Danylchuk. "The kids really got pumped and were wanting to ask questions, and were fascinated by history and geography."

Even though the treasure hunt clue book is completed, Danylchuk says that her class is now looking for other ways in which they can contribute to the ThanksUSA cause.

"They really want to raise money," she said. "They know that they've already put their chapter out there, and that it will raise money for the soliders' families, but now they want to go out and raise money on their own — so it really inspired some great community service projects as well."