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Young nonprofit a success

By: Monty Tayloe

In 2005, McLean Elementary School students Kelsi and Rachel Okun were unsuccessfully attempting to solve the clues encoded within Michael Stadther's 2005 book, "A Treasure's Trove," a children's book that was part of a national treasure hunt for a series of jeweled insects.

The clues were very difficult, even for adults, and Kelsi, now 9, and Rachel, 11, never got very far with the hunt, but they did get a good idea.

Two years later, their idea has generated more than \$3 million in college scholarships for the families of military personnel, caused thousands of children to learn more about American history and inspired a local jeweler to craft a \$100,000+ history-themed set of pirate treasure. That's a long resume for entrepreneurs still looking forward to middle school.

"It shows that anybody can have an idea to help other people and get people involved," Rachel Okun said.

Their idea turned into Thanks USA, a nonprofit American history quiz and treasure hunt aimed at children, but meant to be completed with their families and a fair amount of research.

Participants join the hunt via the organization's website and use a special book. The treasure part of the equation was created by Great Falls jeweler Jorge Adeler, who doesn't use the word "treasure" lightly.

"I wanted it to really be a treasure, so it's an Italian leather treasure box, like pirates always have, and I stuffed it with over 1,000 carats of pearls, loose gems and silver coins from a real Spanish shipwreck," Adeler said.

Along with an actual value of around \$100,000, each of the items in the chest has a historical reason behind it.

"There are historical coins, elements of the Civil War, and something from all 50 states," Adeler said.

The girls came up with the idea because they wanted to help the military, so the treasure hunt acts as an advertisement and incentive for participants to donate to ThanksUSA.



Photo Courtesy/Erin Fogarty Owen From left, Jorge Adeler, Thanks USA winner Tom Thompson, and Bob Okun pose with the \$120,000 Thanks USA Treasure package created by Adeler.

Donations are used to fund college scholarships for the families of U.S. troops. So far, more than 1,000 people have benefited from ThanksUSA scholarships.

"We did some research, and the troops themselves have the G.I. Bill, but there is very little in terms of educational programs for their families," explains Bob Okun, a McLean lobbyist and the girls' father.

Okun helped his daughters develop their idea working with an assortment of friends and neighbors who donated their time to create Thanks USA, including PR specialists, teachers and web experts. Kelsi and Rachel also had a lot of input.

"My class designed 50 pages of the game book ... we tried to make it just right, it's not going to be that you can just zoom through it," Kelsi Okun said.

On Monday, June 26, Thanks USA formally awarded its first prize to Tom Thompson, of Stewart Manor, N.Y., and his 14-year-old daughter, Kelly. Thompson was selected by drawing from a pool of treasure hunt finalists after last year's contest ended.

"I think he thought it was a prank call at first," said Rachel, who along with Kelsi called Thompson to tell him about his winnings. Meanwhile, this year's version of the contest is still going on, and will continue on the Web at www.ThanksUSA.org until Sept. 4.