

08/01/2006

Giving thanks, hunting treasure

By: Abri Nelson

Do you know where the Scioto River is? Rachel and Kelsi Okun might be able to tell you. The girls are the founders of ThanksUSA, a McLean-based nonprofit organization that is raising money to aid the families of U.S. soldiers stationed overseas.



Rachel, 10, and Kelsi Okun, 8, founders of ThanksUSA, a non profit dedicated to aiding families of U.S. soldiers stationed overseas, with their dog, Miles, the organization mascot.

ThanksUSA was born last fall when Rachel, 10, and Kelsi, 8, asked their parents, Bob and Deanna Okun, if it would be possible to create a national treasure hunt to raise awareness about a cause. They decided that they wanted to find a way to give college scholarships to the families of soldiers so that they can receive an education.

"It was all the little miracles on the way that made it happen," said Deanna Okun, who thought of the name for the project, Treasure Hunt Aiding Needs of Kids (and spouses) of those Serving the United States of America.

With the aid of teachers and friends, the Okun family designed a treasure hunt based on the history of the United States and wrote a puzzle book with 12 parts, each based on a state. It is free to play, but hunters are encouraged to donate money to the cause. The hunt started on Memorial Day, and the number of participants increases daily.

"We just thought, wouldn't it be great if we could get people to work for something good?" Rachel said. "It's taught us that if you persevere, you can get something big to happen."

Many organizations have already donated money for the scholarships, as well as expensive prizes that will be awarded once the project ends on Labor Day, including the grand prize of a trip to Washington, D.C. to hunt for real treasure donated by Jorge Adeler of Adeler's Jewelers in Great Falls.

When Adeler, an avid treasure hunter, discovered in the late spring that ThanksUSA was not giving away any authentic treasure, he asked the Okun family if he could donate a treasure chest worth \$100,000. He said that his motivation was the girls' passion for the project and what it represents for our country.

"I wanted to help turn their dream into a reality," he said. "We always say, what can I do? These girls are telling us, a lot!"

The treasure includes a gemstone from every state, historical artifacts and jewelry. Every piece represents a part of history and Adeler is including information about their historical significance along with the chest.

"They are fighting for us, for all of us. For our freedom, our rights and our comfort," he said of U.S. soldiers. "They are given an order and as professionals they do it. It is the job of all of us to help."

ThanksUSA hopes to give away 1,000 scholarships worth between \$1,000 and \$5,000. Donations can be made through their Web site, www.thanksusa.org , and anyone can sign up for the treasure hunt there as well.

As for the Scioto River, you'll just have to look it up.