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## Putting the Treasure in 'Treasure Hunt'

Great Falls jeweler donates \$115,000 worth of treasure to ThanksUSA.

By [Aranya Tomseth](#)

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When George Adeler read about two young girls' efforts to start a national treasure hunt to raise scholarship money for U.S. troops and their family, he was inspired. As the owner of Adeler Jewelers in Great Falls, and the father of two daughters, he felt particularly drawn to the cause.

"It's a treasure hunt, and what they were missing was a real treasure," said Adeler.

The cause, ThanksUSA, is the brain child of two sisters, Kelsi Okun, 8, and Rachel Okun, 10, both of whom are students at Franklin Sherman Elementary School in McLean. After participating in a national treasure hunt in the summer of 2005, the girls decided that it would be fun to create a national treasure hunt of their own. Their parents, Robert and Deanna Okun, suggested that the hunt be centered around a good cause. After some family brainstorming, the idea to create ThanksUSA (Treasure Hunt Aiding Needs of Kids and Spouses of those serving the United States of America), a scholarship fund for the families of U.S. troops, was born.

With the help of friends, neighbors and teachers, the Okun family created a book of 12 state-oriented puzzles. The hunt kicked off in May and those who want to participate simply have to register at [www.ThanksUSA.org](http://www.ThanksUSA.org) to access the book of questions and clues. When the puzzles are solved, registered participants can submit their answers online, and all correct answers are automatically entered into the drawing for an impressive roster of donated prizes. Kelsi and Rachel's hope is that the hunt will inspire people to make monetary contributions to the ThanksUSA scholarship fund.

PRIZES for each stage of the hunt include a family vacation to Disneyworld, a family vacation to see the Egyptian pyramids, Harley Davidson motorcycles and much more. George Adeler felt that a trunk of real jewels and treasure was so appropriate for the cause that he was compelled to meet with the Okun family and see if they would be interested in adding his donation to the equation.

When George Adeler and his daughter Wendy Adeler visited the Okun family at their home in McLean, it was a match from the moment they met.

### Get Involved

To make a tax-deductible donation to ThanksUSA, mail a check to 1390 Chain Bridge Road, #260, McLean, VA 22101. Checks should be made payable to ThanksUSA. Donations may also be made online at [www.ThanksUSA.org](http://www.ThanksUSA.org), or by calling 1-888-THX-USA0 (1-888-849-8720). To join "The Hunt" visit [www.ThanksUSA.org](http://www.ThanksUSA.org).



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Rachel and Kelsi Okun, and George Adeler recently appeared on a local affiliate news program.

"A lot of miracles have come from this, but one of them was when he and Wendy came to our house because they just so got this idea," said Deanna Okun. "What we wanted from the beginning was a treasure, and he came in and said, 'what you need is things related to American history and pirates and treasure,' and it was just, wow — everything has just been wow."

In fact, the Adeler's hit it off so well with the Okun's that George Adeler ended up donating even more than he had planned.

"I was originally thinking of donating \$20,000 worth of treasure, but the more I heard from these two girls of their dreams and plans... I just got captivated by their excitement and enthusiasm, so I decided to throw all of my support into the project," said Adeler.

Subsequently, Adeler put together a treasure chest containing \$100,000 worth of jewels, gems, pearls and gold. The treasure is now part of the grand prize for the ThanksUSA hunt. Adeler also threw in an extra \$15,000 worth of jewels for one of the 12 puzzle prizes.

"This is an incredible example of what two girls can do to change the energy of thousands of people and channel it into something constructive," said Adeler. "If they can do it, we can all do it."

Deanna Okun said she and the girls were stunned when George Adeler dropped by to show them the contents he had chosen for the treasure chest.

"We were just blown away," said Rachel. "He's so wonderful and he's helped us so much on this project — he's part of the family now... it's so great that someone just ends up on your doorstep saying they want to help and so full of energy. We're just astounded by it."

Deanna Okun said that they never expected such a hefty contribution.

"We would have been happy to have him donate any amount, and then he came in and all of a sudden he throws this thing out on the dining room table, and it was just unbelievable," she said. She added that the treasure chest is the perfect prize for group contestants such as churches and non-profit organizations.

"It's a good one for people who are playing for a group or a charity," she said. "They can take that and make it available to others, so it's a gift that keeps on giving."

THE THANKSUSA treasure hunt ends in September, and the girls have spent a good portion of their summer promoting the hunt and its scholarship cause. They appeared in a segment of "The Today Show" in May, and are scheduled for "Good Morning America" later this month.

"Going on 'The Today Show' was awesome," said Rachel. "We learned so much about really partnering with people and making this project a success."

Kelsi Okun said that she sometimes gets nervous for the television appearances, but enjoys the fact that they are promoting such a worthwhile cause.

"We've been having an awesome summer working on Thanks," said Kelsi. "It's been really, really exciting and amazing."

Thus far, the Okun's have been very pleased with the level of participation.

"We have over 5,000 people signed up to play the game and answer questions," said Deanna Okun.

"It's been very fun to see people playing, and we've been getting a tremendous amount of e-mails from people that think the game is fun and educational."

With the money collected so far, ThanksUSA was able to award 1,001 scholarships of \$1,000 and up.

"The letters just went out to the scholarship winners, so that was exciting," said Deanna Okun. George Adeler said that he was incredibly impressed by the fact that two girls came up with such a worthy cause.

"Thousands and thousands of dollars will be collected for this cause that is incredibly needed," said Adeler. "What these two girls are doing is incredible... we're talking about something that is not seen everyday. How many kids sacrifice weekends and summers and winters from going to movies and things to help soldiers? Maybe one weekend, but nine months of effort? This is unbelievable."