



Abundant Kindness Recognized

**McLean sisters among 'Ten Most Caring People
in America'**

By Sharon North, [The Connection](#)

Wednesday, October 07, 2009

Rachel and Kelsi Okun received a surprising phone call last May from Val Halamandaris, founder of the Washington, D.C.-based Caring Institute, telling them that they were among 10 Americans nationwide selected to receive the Institute's Caring Award for 2009. The girls, ages 14 and 11, are McLean residents and co-founders of Thanks USA, a "treasure hunt" themed social studies quiz that raises money to fund scholarships for members of the military and their families. Rachel and Kelsi will be honored at an awards ceremony given by The Caring Institute on Oct. 13 at the Westin Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles, Calif. They will join fellow award recipient Gen. Colin Powell and seven others as the Institute's "Ten Most Caring People in America for 2009." The award winners were announced Sept. 30 by former Majority Leader Sen. Robert Dole, chairman of the Institute's Board of Trustees. Past award recipients include former President Jimmy Carter and his wife Rosalynn, chimpanzee researcher Jane Goodall and poet Maya Angelou.

The Caring Institute's mission is to promote the values of caring, integrity and public service. The Institute was established in 1985 by Halamandaris after he met Mother Teresa of Calcutta who encouraged him to act in the face of what she saw as a "poverty of the spirit" of caring in the developed world. Halamandaris hoped that by recognizing the caring efforts of a few people each year the Institute could encourage others to help those less fortunate and enrich society at large.

Thanks USA's 2009 Treasure Hunt is scheduled to begin this Thanksgiving. It can be accessed online or played using a hard copy booklet available through the organization's Web site at www.thanksusa.org. Thanks USA awarded 400 scholarships totaling \$1.2 million in 2008, and hopes to award a total of 250 scholarships of \$3,000 each in 2009. The organization currently has the local support of the girls' schools, teachers and members of the military as well as local business. They also have school support in all 50 states. "The support has been overwhelming," said Bob Okun, their father.



Photo by Sharon North/The Connection
Kelsi and Rachel Okun with their National Association of Broadcasters Education Foundation Celebration of Service to America award and the 2007 and 2008 Treasure Hunt booklets.



Photo by Sharon North/The Connection
Rachel, Deanna, Bob and Kelsi Okun with their dog Miles. Rachel and Kelsi will be honored Oct. 13 as two of the 'Most Caring People in America.'

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The girls still do not know who nominated them for the Caring Award. Asked whether they are nervous about attending such a large ceremony, Kelsi said. "Yes, it is a little intimidating. We will be with some famous people." They have to make acceptance speeches too. "It's a little frightening, and we have to put all the excitement and honor of this into a three minute speech," said Rachel. Their parents and grandmother will also attend the ceremony.

Kelsi and Rachel plan to keep Thanks USA going and to stay directly involved as long as possible. "The need is so great, and we want to keep supporting soldiers. Thanks USA is part of who we are and I want to make sure we continue giving to the military. If you open your hearts to strangers, friendships are formed there. That's the heart of our organization," Rachel said.