

ThanksUSA Launches New Scholarship Drive

Okun sisters continue their Treasure Hunt in support of military families

By Sharon North
November 28, 2007

"ThanksUSA was started on a napkin at the Sawtooth Restaurant in Ketchum, Idaho when we were on vacation," said Kelsi Okun. Kelsi, 12, and her sister Rachel, 9, both students at Haycock Elementary School, have, along with their parents and a team of helpers, just finished launching the Treasure Hunt Three of the ThanksUSA annual scholarship drive. When asked for more detail on how ThanksUSA started Rachel Okun said, "A couple of years ago we had sent some care packages to some soldiers, and received thank you letters telling how much the packages meant. At the same time we were doing a treasure hunt in a book called 'The Treasure Trove' by Michael Stadther, and we had seen the movie 'National Treasure' around then too."



Photo by Sharon North
Kelsi and Rachel Okun are looking forward to a successful third Annual ThanksUSATreasure Hunt and Scholarship Drive

The idea of helping the troops by creating an online treasure hunt for people to draw attention to the needs of military families was born. "Education is very important to our family," said the girls' father, Bob Okun, so the sisters decided to try to raise money for academic scholarships.

ThanksUSA stands for Treasure Hunt Aiding Needs of Kids and Spouses of those serving the United States of America. Since 2005 the organization has raised money for college, vocational and technical school scholarships for military family members as a way of thanking the troops for their service to our country.

THE ONLINE HUNT is a way for families, classes and other groups to find "treasure" by answering history questions. Treasure hunt winners are eligible for a prize drawing. Each year of the hunt begins a new effort to collect donations for the scholarship fund. The first year the organization gave out 1,000 scholarships ranging from \$1,000 to \$5,000 each. In year two they awarded 350 \$1,000 scholarships and this year they hope to give 1,000 scholarships ranging from \$1,000 to \$3,000 each.

The scholarships are awarded based on need and academic achievement.

The sisters were exposed firsthand to the hardships of military families by seeing the difficulties that their neighbors, the Ward family, faced while the father, Lt. Col. Lanier Ward, was in Iraq, and, later, when he returned with serious injuries. Since they started the scholarship fund they have received many thank you letters. This past summer, they had the opportunity to travel across the country and visit approximately 20 scholarship recipients at places such as a burn hospital and the "Intrepid Center," a rehabilitation facility, at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, Texas.

ThanksUSA has received much local support. Great Falls jeweler Jorge Adeler spoke of his contribution: "Those two girls are extraordinary. There is no choice but to help them. You have to help others. "My desire to help them is multi-faceted. One, I have to help. Two, we have to help the troops, we have to thank them. Three, we have to encourage young people to help others. They have optimism, dreams ... and if you start early with good deeds you can move mountains. If one kid is inspired by this it is worth it. I will continue to support, I am infected by the 'bug' — those two girls are contagious."

ADDITIONAL SUPPORT has come from Rachel's Girl Scout troop, Kelsi's class at school and several teachers at Haycock and Franklin Sherman Elementary Schools. The principals at the two schools have also been very supportive. Another pair of sisters, Sarah and Rachel Ing, have donated the proceeds from their lemonade stands for the past two years. They were able to give \$1,000 the second year. A family friend helped arrange for his firm, KPMG, to underwrite the printing of last year's treasure hunt book. Television stations donated advertising time. Winners of treasure hunt prizes and scholarship recipients have also helped write questions for the newest hunt.

"Mom and Dad also helped a lot" according to both girls. A longer list of acknowledgements in the "2008 Treasure Hunt Clue Book" includes the names of many other contributors too. Asked about their future aspirations, Rachel said, "I would love to be a teacher. They have made a difference in my life. I also might like to work at the State Department, I have seen what Condoleeza Rice does. I could even be Secretary of State."

Younger sister Kelsi said, "I want to be United States treasurer or president of the World Bank."