

Area students win national recognition for leadership

Local youths win \$1,000 awards for community work

By Peter Krause, The Baltimore Sun

September 19, 2010

Abby Cahalan raised awareness about concussions. Alexander Griffith designed and built a playground. And Raquel Ramos collected thousands of shoes. For these three Baltimore-area youths, being good citizens has paid off in more ways than one.

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The students are among 200 youths recognized nationwide this summer by Kohl's department store for their outstanding community service. Each has received a \$1,000 Kohl's Kids Who Care Regional Scholarship for Positive Community Involvement. Scholarship recipients range in age from 6 to 18 and are chosen based on initiative, creativity, leadership and generosity.

Abby, 14, knows about head injuries firsthand. After suffering a severe concussion while playing soccer in 2008, the Reisterstown teen made it her mission to raise awareness among lawmakers and the public about the danger of head injuries in youth sports.

"When she started experiencing the symptoms of a head injury, we were taken by surprise," says Abby's mother, Joyce Cahalan. "Arms, legs, even a torn ACL — those injuries are visible. What makes a head injury so complicated is that you cannot see it."

The Dulaney High freshman, who had suffered two previous concussions, now has chronic headaches. But she hasn't let that get in the way of drumming up support for the Maryland Concussion Bill, which would provide guidelines to coaches and parents about how to better prevent, identify and treat head injuries.

The scholarship from Kohl's has affirmed Abby's faith in her efforts to raise awareness about head injuries in youth sports, her mother says.

"She hopes that now that this terrible thing has happened to her, perhaps she can help and keep it from happening to others."

Like Abby, Alexander Griffith was moved by his own experience when he decided to create a playground in Russia. Having spent most of his first year of life in Children's Hospital No. 20 in Krasnoyarsk, Siberia, Alexander wanted to have an impact on his birthplace.

So a few years ago, when he was 12, Alexander decided to use his Eagle Scout community service project to design and install a playground at the hospital. The existing playground consisted of one swing and a sandbox.

"He designed the new playground from scratch," says his father, Dwight Griffith, who along with his wife, Jenny, adopted Alexander in 1994. "There were a thousand issues in the whole process, but we managed to work through them all."

Alexander was able to get the playground parts manufactured at a discount. After noticing that most playgrounds in Russia included some sort of wooden folk art, he procured a 20-foot Alaskan cedar log from Canada to be made into a pair of totem poles. Two wood carvers from Tennessee and New York were recruited to fashion the wood into two symbols: a bear and an eagle, representing the friendly relationship between the United States and Russia.

"International shipping of the log was definitely the biggest issue," his father said. The playground pieces were shipped to Maryland, pre-assembled so volunteers would be familiar with how to put them together, and then sent to Siberia.

Alexander, who now attends North Harford High School, raised \$62,856 to pay for the project, which took more than two years to complete. Six people, including Alexander's father, donated \$12,000 of their own money to the project.

The playground was dedicated last year on Alexander's 16th birthday. A CNN news team, nine Russian television stations, a children's choir, and the deputy mayor of Krasnoyarsk were present.

It was coverage of another international event that sparked Raquel Ramos into action. The 12-year-old, who lives in Reisterstown, saw the devastation created by the earthquake in Haiti in January and knew she had to help.

Raquel led a weeklong shoe-drive at Sacred Heart School in Glyndon, where she is a student. The event collected 2,400 pairs of shoes to be donated to earthquake victims through the Tennessee-based charity Soles4Souls.

She also helped organize an "out-of-uniform-day" at her school where students could donate \$1 in exchange for wearing Haitian colored clothing in place of their school uniforms. The effort raised \$3,000.

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