Community Service: How teens can impact the fight against obesity and mentor elementary school children in the process.

Q&A with the winner of our 2013 Student Community Leadership Award

Background:

Many school districts in the United States require a service-learning component as a condition of high school graduation. In Maryland, the first state to require high school students to give back to their communities as a condition of graduation, the State Department of Education describes the practice this way:

> *Service learning is a teaching method that combines meaningful service to the community with curriculum-based learning. Students improve their academic skills by applying what they learn in school to the real world; they then reflect on their experience to reinforce the link between their service and their learning.*

Recognizing the importance of student led learning and student leadership, the Healthy Weight Commitment Foundation chose to pilot an extension of our *Find Your Balance Challenge* contest with our partner HOSA—Future Health Professionals. With more than 150,000 high school student members interested in a future career in health care, we wanted to encourage a connection between elementary school students and high school students in order to heighten community support available through our annual grant program.

How it worked:

HOSA students were given an incentive—help an elementary school enter, complete and finish in the top ten results of the Find Your Balance Challenge—and earn a cash prize, certificate and experience points in leadership and community service. HOSA promoted the program to its Future Health Professionals (student members) during the summer and early fall with webinars, eblasts and promotions on their website. Healthy Weight Commitment Foundation conducted informational webinars, announcements in key HOSA leadership meetings and promotion on TogetherCounts.com.

HOSA—Future Health Professionals could "help" a school in many ways; introduce them to the concept, conduct a training or assembly, hold a meeting with the school health and wellness team—whatever worked for that school and that student—we supported. True to the overarching Together Counts™ program, our approach with schools is flexible. Schools are able to leverage the free resources in anyway that makes a difference in their community. The criteria for the Find Your Balance Challenge is very clearly defined and HOSA students engaged schools who ultimately logged in and began working their way through our grant application.

Enter: Michelle Thomas

Las Cruses High School Junior
Las Cruces New Mexico

Michelle was among the HOSA students who took our challenge and reached out to local schools. The school she helped was Tombaugh Elementary in Las Cruces, New Mexico and their Find Your Balance Challenge application received high marks and was a top finisher. Due to Michelle's intervention, the school was awarded a $2,000 grant to implement healthy changes and improve the energy balance at the school. Michelle answered our questions about her experience, shedding light for teens who may want to engage in their communities, mentor elementary schools and make a difference.

Q: How did you hear about the Find Your Balance Challenge and the chance to get involved?

A: I was searching for ways to promote healthy living on the internet, and I came across the Find Your Balance Challenge.

Q: Why did you get involved?

I wanted to help the community in some way through HOSA, so I thought this would be a good way to reach out.

Q: What did you do exactly?

A: I called one of the local elementary schools and asked them if they would be interested in a partnership with the Las Cruces High School HOSA group so that we could do a community event for the elementary kids. We decided to set up a "duathlon" (running and biking) for the elementary kids so that HOSA could promote proper exercise habits. We also visited the elementary school a few weeks before the duathlon to educate students about running and bicycling techniques as well as provide nutrition education.

Q: How many schools did you contact and how did you contact schools?

A: I contacted two. However, everything came through with only one. I emailed the elementary school P.E. teacher and I called the school and asked to set up an appointment to meet with her and talk about everything.

Q: Did any of your HOSA friends help? Why/why not?

A: Yes. The entire HOSA chapter helped A LOT. They were very interested in helping the kids and they knew it would be a good way to get the message out to little kids to be healthy.

Q: Was it easy to convince the school to apply for the grant?

A: It was. The school board is very interested in HOSA and they like to take every good opportunity that comes.

Q: How much work did you do for the school? Did you offer or did they ask?

A: I offered to do a lot of the work for the school. I knew that it was a busy year and the faculty must have been stressed, so I tried to take the lead along with the HOSA advisors. Our HOSA advisors put a lot of time and effort into making the event achievable. Nothing would have been possible without them.

Q: Would you describe the school you supported as needing help with the obesity issue? Please describe the atmosphere at the school and how receptive they were to your ideas.

How Michelle's outreach made a difference in her community…

"At Tombaugh Elementary we supported energy balance in a few ways. We used both nutritional and Physical Education to reach out to the students about energy balance. To promote physical activity in class we focused on activity, activity level and different types of activities. We participated in the Marathon for Kids program where my students tracked how much they walked, jogged, or ran throughout the school year. If the students completed a marathon (26.2 miles) then they received a shirt. We focused on lifelong activity such as aerobics and dance. I tried to focus on activities they would be able to do over a lifetime. In class we talked about nutrition and what it means to be healthy. The students were shown how to choose healthy portion sizes, and pick healthy alternatives when choosing what they were going to eat. Some of my students made posters to hang around the cafeteria so they would have reminders about healthy eating. I had the students discuss with each other the food that they ate, while not in cafeteria, so they could discuss the health and unhealthy decisions that they made.

In the future, I would really like to emphasis the nutrition part of this program. I would like to get posters and curriculum to distribute among the staff. If I could get the school staff on board, the program would be enforced more consistently throughout the school day. I would like to bring in people from the community to do demonstrations on physical activity and healthy eating choices. I would use the grant money to do to all of this in the next year for the Energy Balance Challenge. My goal is to see the students making better choices at lunch when it comes to eating healthy, and to hear them speak of healthy choices they are making outside of school. I would also like to see them participate more in lifelong physical activities."

Stephanie Hanway, Principal
Tombaugh Elementary School
Las Cruces, New Mexico

A: Yes. The obesity issue is very prevalent in New Mexico. Eating and exercise habits aren't emphasized at schools and are rarely shared in households. Children should learn these things at a young age so that they can keep them up throughout their lives. The elementary school needed help getting the word out to its kids that they should change the way they are spending their time. The kids were receptive to our ideas. They understood that it is important to be healthy to prevent risk factors for future health consequences.

Q: What was the biggest challenge?

A: The biggest challenge was probably getting the word out about the event. Of course, the elementary school knew about it, but it was hard getting the word out to the rest of the city.

Q: Would you do this again?

A: Yes! We are planning on doing another type of event the coming year. We are very excited to start planning it.

Q: What was the best part of being involved in this project?

A: It felt rewarding knowing that I was a part of helping kids understand what it means to be healthy. I'm glad that it got through to them.

Q: Are there any suggestions you have for us? Since you participated in the pilot program, we intend to "tweak" how it works this year.

A: I think that this was a great challenge and I will definitely get the word out to other HOSA chapters. Everything ran smoothly and I don't think there is a need to "tweak" anything.

Q: If you had to sum up why teens like you should support a local elementary school in this way, what would you say?

A: You should always take an interest in educating younger kids about issues that need to be addressed. If they don't learn early, then they never will.

Michelle receives her $1,000 prize at the 2013 HOSA National Leadership Conference in Nashville, TN

Want to get involved?

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Track your FYBC hours by using Barbara James Service Award guidelines at http://www.hosa.org/sites/default/files/BJ13_1.pdf