

Local teens awarded for green-up effort
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Kristin Yeaton of Bedford, Dylan Mahalingam of Derry, Sen. Judd Gregg, Kathy Gregg, Hillary Hughes of Bedford and Nisha Naik, of Derry, during a trip to Washington, D.C., where Dylan, Hillary and Nisha were recognized for their contributions to greening up New Hampshire.
Submitted photo

BEDFORD – Sometimes, ignorance is bliss.

But after learning about endangered species and global warming, Bedford home-schooler Hillary Hughes can no longer see recyclables in a trash can, litter by a roadside, or lights left on in an empty room without a pang of concern.

A year and a half ago, she and two of her friends, Dylan Mahalingam of Derry and Nisha Naik of Bow, launched an effort to get more of those lights turned off and recyclables recycled.

That project, called Green Your Lives, won the three eighth-graders a trip to Washington, D.C., last month, where they spent a couple of hours with Sens. Judd Gregg and Jeanne Shaheen, and received the President's Environmental Youth Award.

Hillary's only regret was that President Obama himself was unavailable at the last minute.

"We got to meet with Lisa Jackson. She was very nice. But I think the president would have been really cool, so I was a little disappointed," Hillary said.

EPA Administrator and Cabinet-ranking staff member Jackson presented Hillary, Dylan and Nisha with the PEYA award for EPA Region I, which includes all of New England.

They received a plaque, a free hotel stay and a private tour of the Smithsonian.

Not to mention the ear of two U.S. senators.

After having breakfast with Sen. Shaheen and visiting her office together, the group spent about two hours with Sen. Gregg, who gave them a tour of the Capitol building.

Hillary said she didn't grill the senators on their environmental habits.

"(Sen. Gregg) asked a lot of questions about our team and our project, and he was very excited to hear about how we were going green with the school, it was fun to talk to him," Hillary said. "(Sen. Shaheen) was also very supportive of our project. She cares about the schools in New Hampshire."

The teens started "Green Your Lives" at Derry's Hood Middle School, where Dylan is a student.

They decided to increase recycling at the school, with the help of teacher Kristen Yeaton, who submitted the group's materials for consideration for the award. Yeaton, a Bedford resident, accompanied the group to D.C.

Green Your Lives created measurable differences in recycling at Hood Middle School, Hillary said.

First, the group surveyed Hood students to find out whether kids were aware that they could recycle at school.

Then they expanded the school's recycling system, promoted it among the students and conducted a follow-up survey.

Hillary said they sent out hundreds of surveys, with the help of Yeaton and the school staff, and found that students were recycling much more than they used to.

They expanded the effort with the Derry Give and Go program, encouraging other schools and Derry residents to go green.

They also took the message to the Web, at www.greenyourlives.org, where Hillary posted information, photos and even movies, including a video of the friends experimenting together with powering a miniature car with solar and hydro energy.

But much of the time, the three friends worked independently.

Nisha did a lot of the research, and Dylan worked on the science and acted as liaison between the group and Hood Middle School, according to Hughes' mother, Angela.

Hillary created the media, including the Web site, the surveys and brochures, and three mini-movies.

"It's been a lot of work, but it's been a good experience," said Hillary.

Hillary is used to working hard.

She's been playing the harp for six years, and the time commitment involved in mastering the instrument was one reason her mother, a former college professor, decided to home-school her three years ago.

They made travel a key piece of their curriculum and found that they loved it, Angela Hughes said.

"We've been to Europe twice this year to study," Hughes said. "I just think kids learn so much better when they experience things hands-on. If you can see the Parthenon, or the Roman Coliseum, you're going to remember that."

Hillary and her 11-year-old brother are home-schooled, while her two younger siblings go to Peter Woodbury Elementary School.

But trips to Europe aside, it hasn't been a vacation, she said.

Home-school starts at the same time every morning – no sleeping in – and includes an hour of harp practice and half an hour of piano practice, Hillary said.

So it was natural for her to take on so much responsibility for Green Your Lives – and it was for a good cause.

Last year, Hillary, Dylan and Nisha worked on a project about endangered species.

That introduction to environmental issues hooked Hillary, who gets a thrill from watching deer, wild turkeys and turtles roam her back yard and the neighboring conservation land.

“I love nature, and we have wild animals here,” Hillary said. “We should try to conserve that land, and different parts of forest and natural life, too. Every year these wild turkeys come by, and they have little chicks and families. The animals are very cool to see.”

Her enthusiasm has inspired the whole family, according to her mother.

“We were not very environmentally friendly before this, but now we’re composting, we’re using our green shopping bags,” Angela Hughes said. “We as a family have benefited, because I think we are more environmentally friendly.”