

Build-A-Bear rewards young founders of non-profits

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Friday July 23, 2010--Talia Leman, center, 15, talks with Tatiana Grossman, left, and Charles Rappazzo, 17, about RandomKid, the charity she started in 2005, during a break at a leadership seminar at Build-A-Bear Workshop headquarters in St. Louis County on Friday. Grossman and Rappazzo were both at the workshop because they were named 2010 Huggable Heroes by Build-A-Bear for their charity work. Leman, a 2007 Huggable Hero, was attending the workshop as the keynote speaker at the awards ceremony on Friday. David Carson dcarson@post-dispatch.com

It started with a fire.

Ashlee Smith's toys were destroyed when her home burned down in 2005. A few years later, when her firefighter father showed her photographs of a wildfire that destroyed hundreds of homes in California, she couldn't help but think of the kids.

"It made me feel really bad because I knew how they felt," said Smith, 11, of Reno, Nevada.

So she founded, Ashlee's Toy Closet, a nonprofit organization that has donated more than 100,000 toys and books to kids in the United States, Canada and Haiti.

Smith was the youngest in a group of 10 "Huggable Heroes" invited to a leadership workshop this week at the Overland-based Build-A-Bear Workshop Inc. The stuffed animal retailer donates \$7,500 in scholarship money to each of the kids selected and \$2,500 to the charity of their choice.

More than 1,200 people applied for the program, now in its seventh year. No one from St. Louis made the final cut, but Simone Bernstein, a recent graduate of Clayton High School and founder of www.stlouisvolunteem.com, was a finalist.

Between the group, they have raised some \$22 million in donations and charitable items and volunteered 650 hours a month.

Founders of nonprofits, they are in the vanguard of what Jourdan Urbach, 18, the oldest and most outspoken in the group, described as a "youthquake" of charity among their generation "that is really going to be this world's saving grace."

Urbach created Children Helping Children, which has raised \$4.6 million for neurological disease research through Concerts for a Cure. A violinist, he has encouraged 700 young professional musicians to join him in benefit performances and in building satellite chapters, which span three continents.

He said he learned the spirit of giving through his Jewish faith and parents. His allowance growing up was divided into thirds: pocket money, savings and charity. He recently founded the International Coalition of College Philanthropists.

"Young leaders are working together," said Urbach, of Roslyn Heights, N.Y. "One action effects another."

Dylan Mahalingam, 14, of New Hampshire, helped found Lil' MDGs (short for Millennium Development Goals) with a few relatives when they were 8 or 9. The group has used the internet to motivate some 20,000 youth volunteers in 40 countries to raise nearly \$800,000 for tsunami relief.

Always encouraged by his parents to finish everything on his plate, he said he was particularly moved by a trip to India, when he saw extreme poverty.

Transformed by a conversation with a wounded veteran, Alison Mansfield, 15, of Fort Wayne, Ind., has shipped 52,000 items, from socks to toiletries, to service members in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Riley Carney, 17, of Englewood, Colo., created Breaking the Chain, which builds schools and provides books for classrooms.

Many participants, like Smith who will enter sixth-grade this fall, plan on reinvesting their \$2,500 grants into their charities.

Smith runs her organization out of a shed full of toys at her home. In her free time, she searches online for fires around the country. Then she calls families and asks them what kind of toys their kids like.
