

YEP

YEP teaches teens value of philanthropy



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NORMAL — Incoming University High School senior Isabel Dawson wants to accomplish more than just graduating, and Youth Engaged in Philanthropy gave her that opportunity.

Dawson is one of 34 high school youth from six area high schools who joined YEP to help their communities by raising awareness and money for not-for-profit organizations.

"I find it really interesting because it improves your maturity and gets you into a business-like atmosphere where you can develop contacts for the future," Dawson said Sunday at YEP's first awards ceremony, at the University Galleries at Uptown Station in Normal. "I still like being a student and having a little fun, but this is also very important for our community, as well."

Under the auspices of the Illinois Prairie Community Foundation, YEP, now in its second year, enlisted an anonymous donor who offers \$10,000 annually to give away to area not-for-profit groups. The youths are charged with setting up a grant cycle process.

Over those two years, the program has received and reviewed 45 grant proposals requesting a total of more than \$75,000 and awarded a total of \$20,000 to 22 of those proposals. All grant money went toward projects and programs affecting area youths.

All grants are reviewed and approved by a board of directors.

"I really like the atmosphere of this program and the lessons we have learned about dealing with people and what's important in a community," Dawson said.

The students gain first-hand experience about the nonprofit sector and the impact that philanthropy has on a community, said Sandy McGhee, mentor and program development director.

"YEP members learn to assess community needs through volunteer activities, to implement a granting cycle, evaluate grant proposals and hone communication and decision-making skills while developing teamwork and leadership qualities," she said.

The grant recipients for this year included Heartland Community College, Easter Seals, Fostering Dignity, Girl Scouts, the Boys and Girls Club of Bloomington-Normal, Fellowship of Christian Athletes, Project Hope of NCHS, Regional Alternative School, University of Illinois Extension Stylistics 4-H Club, Children's Discovery Museum and the Illinois Wesleyan University Peace Garden.

This year, members began an endowment fund to fund grant requests into the future. The group set a fundraising goal of \$10,000, of which the groups has secured more than \$4,200 so far.

"This has been an opportunity to develop leadership skills and to give something back to the community," said incoming U High senior Christian Prenzler, the fundraising committee chairman. "I have learned more about listening to the needs of our community."

Rockford and Sycamore are the two other Illinois communities with such youth philanthropy programs. Blair Wright, who was a member of the Sycamore group and a May graduate of IWU, helped organize the local program last year and has been a mentor for the students.

"I thought it really helped me out, and I didn't see any reason why it wouldn't work here," she said. "But the students really make this work. They are so mature and have such leadership skills. They have been amazing to work with."