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Queens Has 8 Semifinalists In Quality Of Life Contest

By Amy Lotven



Borough President Helen Marshall poses with the 27 students she honored for their participation in the WISE Quality of Life contest.

Eight creative and altruistically inclined Queens high school students are among the 18 semifinalists competing for more than \$34,000 in scholarships from a non-profit organization.

This year marks the 10th anniversary of the Working In Support of Education (WISE) Quality of Life contest, which is sponsored by Deutsche Bank, the Peter Jay Sharp Foundation and other institutions.

The contest asks students in grades 9-12 to ponder the question, "What would you do to improve the quality of life in New York City?"

This year, more than 1,500 students answered. On May 11th, Queens Borough President Helen Marshall honored 27 students from Queens high schools, including the eight semifinalists, for their innovative projects.

"I am delighted to recognize the talented students who have combined their writing and creative abilities to suggest ways in which their communities can be improved, Marshall said. "These students are part of New York City's next generation of thinkers and problem solvers."

Semifinalists Carina Leong and Pearl Wong, both seniors from Forest Hills High School, conducted a survey to measure the public's awareness of ovarian cancer. They chose their subject after Leong's grandmother died in January 2004.

Noting that her grandmother wasn't diagnosed until she was in Stage 3 of the disease, Leong wondered why it could not have been discovered earlier.

After doing research, she and Wong discovered that a huge percentage of victims are not aware of the symptoms.

The two found that only 4 percent of the women surveyed knew what the symptoms were, and a large percentage believed that undergoing an annual Pap smear would detect the cancer, which is not the case. Pap smears detect cervical cancer.

Leong and Wong have proposed that information about ovarian cancer symptoms be included in packages of women's sanitary napkins. The two also want to create O-shaped fans printed with the information.

Kim Manis, of Townsend Harris High School in Flushing, believes that "girls often get turned off to math courses because they cannot envision themselves in math careers." The senior designed and implemented an after-school program serving 200 middle school students from two dozen city schools. For her project she conducted a formal evaluation of that program.

International High School students Jeny Cen Wu, Pamela Ossana and Monika Pal surveyed immigrant workers to glean their awareness of worker's rights.

Their advisor, Noreen Perlmutter, said the students were inspired after studying labor abuses in class.

On discovering many people were completely unaware of either labor laws or of legal resources that could assist workers in case of abuse, the students created and published an immigrant

worker's rights handbook at the Long Island City school.

The book includes not only information on rights and resources, but also personal stories, poems and other artistic expressions from immigrant workers regarding their work experience.

"They are beside themselves with happiness (to be included in the semifinalists)," said their advisor.

The students are also thrilled to have received a grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to publish more copies.

Semifinalist Razeen Zaman, another Townsend Harris student, used expert interviews and surveys to show a need for legislation and a public awareness campaign to eradicate the bedbug epidemic in the city.

Alexandra Stergiou, also from Townsend Harris, offered a proposal that will help raise awareness of community-based centers that support caregivers of dementia patients. Stergiou's idea also came from personal experience. "My grandmother, who I live with, and my neighbor were both caregivers of their husbands who had Alzheimer's disease and neither of them used community-based services," she said.

According to WISE spokesperson Danny Voloch, many former winners of the scholarship prize have continued their work in their chosen fields.

In fact the program recently reconnected with a student who had conducted a project that examined the inequities between private and public SAT preparation courses, and recommended low-income students receive the private SAT classes at no cost.

That student was recently granted \$2 million from the Peter Jay Sharp Foundation to implement the program.

The contest winners will be announced June 7th at the Deutsche Bank offices in Manhattan.