

Teens honored for service and spirit

BY ANNE TERNUS-BELLAMY
Enterprise staff writer

Since 1992, the city of Davis' Golden Heart Awards have served two purposes: ensuring that some good can come from even the most unthinkable of tragedies, and reminding the community that for every teenager who ends up in the news for the wrong reason, there are countless more youths quietly doing good — and even great — things every day.

The awards were created in the wake of Andrew Mockus' death 26 years ago. A 14-year-old Holmes Junior High School student at the time, Mockus was killed by a group of Davis teens who beat him, robbed him of \$2 and pushed him into the path of a moving train.

Stunned, the city responded by holding public forums to discuss the issues facing the community's youth and ways the city could do more to help. In the end, the Davis City Council adopted seven recommendations that grew out of the forums, including the creation of the Golden Heart Awards, which would honor local teens. The awards would be given annually in two categories: overcoming personal challenges and community service.

Three youths received awards this week during a ceremony at Tuesday's City Council meeting: Sithmi Jayasundara, Elijah Smith and Nora Abduli. Jayasundara and Smith received the awards for their community service and Abduli for overcoming personal challenges.

Presenting the awards were council members, including one — Will Arnold — who was once on the receiving end.

"I am very proud to have been a recipient of a Golden Heart as a young person," Arnold said, adding that while he did not know Mockus, he, too, was a junior high



WAYNE TILCICK/ENTERPRISE PHOTO

Flanked by City Councilman Will Arnold, left, and Mayor Robb Davis, Elijah Smith accepts his Golden Heart award at Tuesday's City Council meeting.

student in Davis when Mockus was killed.

Two decades later, it was Arnold presenting a Golden Heart award to Smith.

Elijah Smith was nominated for the award by Jann Murray-García, who described in her nomination letter the impact Smith has had on his community, from leading anti-bullying efforts to creating healing dialogues among Davis students in the wake of hate incidents.

A junior at Davis High School, Smith serves as president of the Black Student Union, a club that has grown to include about 50 students of all races and ethnicities.

"It is a comfortable place for many different types of students to find emotional and social safety, connection and meaningful dialogue and action about often-contentious issues," said Murray-García.

And it's largely such a place because of Smith's leadership, she added.

"As one of few black young men in his classes," Murray-García said, "Elijah has chosen to risk sharing his experiences as a young black person in Davis, opening himself up to social interrogation both by

his peers and teachers.

"In these last few months, the school community has depended on Elijah's leadership in crafting a constructive response to the series of hate incidents, showing up as graffiti at Davis High," Murray-García said.

"He served on a 'We All Belong' panel with his peers, again sharing his experiences and those of some of his peers, about the challenges of walking a campus where these hate incidents can happen isolated or in series at any time."

Smith also led the Black Student Union in a series of constructive dialogues around these incidents and is now working with Kate Snow, the school district's climate coordinator, along with a handful of his Davis High peers, on how best to respond to these events for the good of the entire campus.

"Elijah and his leadership are an essential gift to our community," Murray-García said.

Sithmi Jayasundara is another leading light in Davis.

Since 2014, she has been a committed volunteer with Team Davis, the local Special Olympics team with about 170 children and

adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities from throughout Yolo County.

Jayasundara started as an assistant basketball coach for Team

Davis when she was a student at Holmes. Since then, she has only added more duties, now coaching basketball, softball, soccer and track and field. She spends at least one day every week volunteering with Team Davis, and coaches call her an integral part of the team, as well as someone on whom they depend.

"She knows everyone's name and greets everyone with a smile," Robin Dewey and Cindy True wrote in their nomination letter.

"Her calm demeanor and ongoing encouragement has a way of addressing the individual needs of our athletes who may get tired, stressed or need to rest."

Jayasundara, they said, "has a special touch with individuals and is an outstanding volunteer."

In accepting the award from Mayor Robb Davis, Jayasundara thanked her fellow volunteers and the Team Davis athletes.

Because of them, she said, "I've become a much better person."

She also thanked her parents "for always teaching me to be kind."

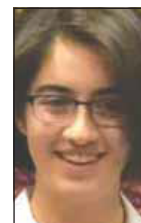
Before presenting Jayasundara with her Golden Heart award, the mayor noted that of all of the ceremonies the council presides over, this annual event is the one that uplifts all of the council members and reminds them that no matter the challenges they deal with in their roles, they are small "compared to what these young people face."

Nora Abduli is one such young person.

Nominated by her counselor at



JAYASUNDARA



ABDULI

Holmes, Marci Montanari, Abduli has inspired many at the school by her perseverance following tragedy.

During the summer of her 14th year, Abduli

lost her father to cancer.

"Every moment of every day she deals with the gravity of this loss," Montanari said in her nomination. "Despite this, Nora maintains an incredible sense of humor and a strong desire to make others laugh."

One of the ways she has done so: her campaign "Push for the Tush," which involves wearing your underwear over the top of your pants.

When she first heard about it, Montanari was a little taken aback: She's used to hearing all kinds of different things from her students, but this was unique.

Turns out it was Abduli's effort to raise awareness about colon cancer, just one way she's found to channel her grief into making a difference.

"Nora has never been known to shy away from difficult things," Montanari said. "It simply isn't her character. She carries on each day, makes other people smile and gives back to the community."

She also does so by volunteering at the Davis library, even as she takes care of classwork, juggles after-school activities and helps out with her family's small business.

Every year, nominations for Golden Heart awards open in November and are accepted through January. A selection committee then chooses the finalists. This year the committee was composed of Snow; Stephanie Koop, a Recreation and Park commissioner; and Robert Larson, city community services coordinator.