

Council lauds teen recipients of Golden Heart awards

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Enterprise staff writer

Four Davis teens were honored by the City Council on Tuesday for their efforts in making this city a better place — for the homeless, for individuals with disabilities, for LGBT youth, for foster cats and low-income soccer players.

Along the way, they put in hundreds of volunteer hours, led their peers into action and,

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From left, Charlie Hilliard, Vlnita Saxena, Silas Kirsch and Lindsay Vernau show off their Golden Heart awards at Tuesday's council meeting.

GOLDEN: Awards honor memory of slain Holmes student

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at times, had to overcome their own personal challenges to do so.

These 2019 recipients of the city's annual Golden Heart awards follow in the footsteps of dozens of Davis teens who have been similarly recognized, all in memory of a Davis youth who never had a chance to make similar contributions.

Andrew Mockus, then a 14-year-old student at Holmes Junior High School, was killed in 1992 by a group of Davis teens who beat him, robbed him 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 youths and ways the city could do more to help.

In the end, the City Council adopted seven recommendations that grew out of the forums, including the creation of the Golden Heart Awards, which would honor local teens for the good that they do. The awards would be given annually in two categories: overcoming personal challenges and community service.

One teen honored this year — Charlie Hilliard — received an award for both his community service and for overcoming personal challenges.

Hilliard, said Councilman Will Arnold, "brings maturity, compassion, wisdom, truth and dedication to King High School, and all staff and students here have benefitted from their presence."

After gauging student interest, Hilliard created a Gay-Straight Alliance at King High to empower all students to learn about themselves and each other with respect and

compassion, promote acceptance of self and others, connect with the larger LGBTQIA+ community, and share kindness while promoting a positive school climate.

"This club was Charlie's idea and creation," said Arnold. "With Charlie's guidance, King High's GSA club provided a place for students to talk with each other and discuss real-world issues. The legacy of the passion and courage that Charlie shared with King by creating a GSA lives on."

In accepting the Golden Heart award, Hilliard recalled the kindness of a stranger in the Davis library parking lot during a particularly difficult moment when Hilliard was around 13 years old. She looked Hilliard in the eye and said, "it's going to be OK."

"I think about that event a lot when I'm struggling," Hilliard said, "that kindness is easy."

Three other teens received Golden Heart awards for community service — Silas Kirsch, Vinita Saxena and Lindsey Vernau.

Kirsch, said Councilman Dan Carson, "takes the ideals and messages of Youth Leadership Davis deeply. His compassion, grace, and passion for viewing the world in head, heart and with soul, makes him a standout."

Youth Leadership Davis students serve as trained interns at host churches participating in the Davis Interfaith Rotating Winter Shelter. They work with shelter guests using the training they've received, including in compassionate listening, mental health, first aid, personal power and shelter operations and procedures.

Kirsch went through more than 80 hours of training in preparation for over 40 hours of volunteer work staffing the host-site intake and working with guests and other volunteers.

"In addition, he has led and participated in dozens of student-directed Youth Leadership Davis club meetings during school, designing and implementing community service projects, drives for shelter supplies, topical forums with guest speakers on homelessness and articles for local media."

Kirsch also was invited to be the student member on the IRWS Board of Directors.

For his part, Kirsch thanked his family and fellow Davis residents who serve the homeless, saying, "without this foundation of love I could not be expressing this compassion and care in the community."

Vinita Saxena, meanwhile, has been an outstanding and long-term volunteer for Team Davis, said Councilman Lucas Frerichs.

Team Davis is a local Special Olympics team, serving approximately 170 children and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities from Yolo County. Team Davis offers eleven sports, along with a number of other programs including art, singing, nutrition classes, gardening and regular dances and activities.

Saxena has served as a committed volunteer for Team Davis since 2013 when she was a student at Holmes Junior High.

She has also been very involved in the Davis High School Best Buddies organization — a partner organization of Team Davis' which matches individuals

with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities for one-on-one friendships. As part of Best Buddies, Saxena helps organize a number of social activities for Team Davis participants.

She has received as much as she's given.

"About 10 years ago I met my best friend Ashley and we were instantly best friends," Saxena said when accepting her award. "I learned ... she had a learning disability, but that didn't change anything."

Ashely joined Team Davis, Saxena said, "and since we did everything together, I joined, too, as a volunteer. It was a great sense of community and there was courage and bravery and I remember thinking to myself this is where I want to be, this is what I want to do ... it's changed my life and I'm glad to be a part of Team Davis."

Finally, there's Lindsey Vernau.

"Like many good

humans," said Mayor Pro Tem Gloria Partida, "Lindsey has a big heart for those less fortunate — she is compassionate and really cares for their condition. However what makes Lindsey truly special is that she has turned typical concern into atypical action — by giving her time to actually save and improve lives."

In particular, Vernau is passionate about helping animals and kids in need, whether they are homeless cats and kittens found in the area or less fortunate children from around the world. Since 2013, starting at the age of 12, Lindsey has been heavily involved in two primary service activities related to these passions, and her work continues today.

Since mid-2014 Vernau has volunteered fostering cats and kittens for the Yolo SPCA along with the UC Davis Fracture Program, which benefit homeless, sick and injured animals. Over the past four and a half years, she has provided around-the-clock care for

approximately 300 kittens — equal to at least 2,500 hours to get them healthy and prepared to be successfully adopted into forever homes.

In 2013 Vernau was part of a group of local youth who started a non-profit organization called Second Touch Soccer, collecting and sending used soccer gear to children across the globe. Lindsey is now the president of Second Touch Soccer, overseeing all board meetings, decisions, activities, finances and volunteers.

"Lindsey is by nature shy, but in order to best serve her foster cats and the Second Touch Soccer organization she has learned to work outside of her comfort zone. She gives a tremendous amount of time to these community organizations and is devoted and dedicated to the efforts. She is committed to growing these activities by spreading her passion and encouraging others, particularly local teens to get involved."





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