

Bookshelves Lead To Nobel Winner

A student-run book program luring more than 1,000 Santa Fe children into reading has drawn a Nobel Prize winner into its pages.

Started in 2011 by a student group called Youth United from the Santa Fe School for the Arts & Sciences, Hooked On Books was named the winner of the 2012 Global Call to Action Challenge.

Co-sponsored by the Arvada, Colo.-based Pearson Foundation and PeaceJam, the award landed the students \$1,000 and a trip to Denver to meet 2011 Nobel Peace Prize winner Leymah Gbowee on Nov. 13. Gbowee led a peaceful women's movement in Liberia. Her efforts played a pivotal role in ending the Liberian Civil War. Gbowee will visit the students here in Santa Fe sometime later this year.

The students learned of the accolade at school early Monday morning.

"I put the conference call on speaker phone and held it to a microphone," principal Rayna Dineen said. "They all cheered and couldn't believe it."

In honoring Santa Fe, PeaceJam lauded its "citywide effort led and coordinated by Youth United to inspire and encourage children with the joys of reading. In a short time, Youth United's efforts have made a major impact on the children and community of Santa Fe," according to a press release.

No one with PeaceJam could be reached for comment.

Dineen learned something was brewing last week when a PeaceJam spokesperson called to let her know the school was one of the top four finalists in the U.S. Earlier, she had filled out a form describing Hooked On Books and sent the organization a video of the students working on the campaign.

"I didn't understand at the time what it was for," she said.

Some of the youths had once struggled with their own reading.

Seventh-grader Indu Holdsworth, 12, said she comes to school nearly every Saturday to help judge contest entries and conceive new ideas for the contests that form the impetus for Hooked On Books. He also helped mentor some "reading buddies" by reading to them.

"They were really sweet," Holdsworth said. "They really wanted to learn."

“I had heard the literacy rate in New Mexico was pretty low,” he continued. “It made me feel like I had to do something about it.

“I was a bad reader, and I felt really horrible,” he continued. “It doesn’t feel good when you can’t read really well.”

The classrooms burst into cheers and applause when the students heard the announcement.

“We all were freaked out,” Holdsworth said. “We all clapped. A few of us jumped up and down.”

Seventh-grader Nathan Hield, also 12, became involved after he won a Hooked On Books contest by designing a book cover.

“We go around to schools and deliver the rules of new contests and the winners of contests,” he said.

He also helped set up bookshelves at the Division of Motor Vehicles for youngsters waiting with their parents.

“We also did a prison project,” Hield continued. “The children of the inmates can’t see their parents. We had the parents record a book on a CD so the child could read the book while hearing the parent’s voice.”

Community service

All students at the School for the Arts & Sciences are required to perform community service. Concerned about New Mexico’s abysmal literacy rate (49th in the country), about a year ago they designed a contest to convince non-readers that reading is fun.

When they learned some children couldn’t read well enough to enter a contest, they created a two-week summer reading camp. They based the camp on intensive phonics through hands-on activities and games. Participants began as a “page,” then grew through the royal ranks to become a “knight,” “prince” or “princess” by playing phonics-based games like Word Jousting, Reading Baseball or Vocabulary Twister. Their achievements were rewarded with accessories like crowns, magic wands and swords.

Many of the young readers were one to two years behind in school and in danger of being held back, Dineen said. Many of their families spoke only Spanish. All of the participants grew an average of one year in their reading skills by the program’s end, Dineen said.

The project germinated last fall when about 50 youths ranging from ages 14-17 formed a steering committee called Youth United. The group met on alternate Saturdays. First they decided they needed prizes to jump-start learning. They knew once a student grasped the joy of words, their

adventures were just beginning. A national Albertson's nonprofit program awarded the project \$10,000.

Entrants could choose a reading contest based on the requirements and prizes. The first prize was an iPad. Other incentives ranged from ice cream coupons to Kindles and skateboards. One lucky winner won a free trip to the Los Angeles premiere of "The Hunger Games."

Realizing books could become magnets if shelved in corners where children wait, the youths painted bookshelves and installed them at the DMV, the Christus St. Vincent emergency room, the state Children, Youth and Families Department offices and local urgent care and pediatric clinics. Group members donated many books for young readers to borrow and donate back. Local businesses responded by creating their own lending libraries.

Dineen isn't sure how many members will make the drive up to Denver. The number depends on how many the foundation can accommodate.

"We had always been connected with PeaceJam because I think the work of Nobel Prize winners is really important and inspiring for kids," she said. "I didn't really imagine we would be winning anything."

Gbowee will visit the Santa Fe school sometime before the end of the year to discuss new approaches for the campaign.

In the meantime, Dineen dreams a generous donor will fund a trip to Disneyland for one lucky new reader.

Youth United will use the \$1,000 in prize money to buy more books.