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Leaders respond to needs

25 complete course focused on service

By JANUARY WETZEL

There were no caps and gowns for the 25 adults in this year's class of Leadership Jackson County, but that didn't take away from the feeling of accomplishment each felt.

After spending nearly a year working on six projects to benefit the community, the class presented the results Thursday to friends, family, coworkers and community members at the Jackson County Education Center.

With the theme of "leading through partnerships," each group worked closely with a local agency to provide some kind of service, whether piloting a leadership program for young girls, building picnic tables for Muscatatuck Wildlife Refuge or gathering information for a possible skate park in Jackson County.

Ann Windley, executive director of Leadership Jackson County, couldn't have been more proud of her students.

"They did an outstanding job this year," Windley said Thursday. "We've never done the class like this before where they have to come up with their own projects, so it was a unique experience for everyone involved, and I think both the class and the agencies took a lot out of it."

Windley was impressed not only with the final products but with the students' desire to remain involved with the agencies and causes they worked for.

"We have received many positive comments from the various places that we were partnered with because many of our class members have decided to continue volunteering or participating with them," Windley said. "This program helps these agencies get things done that their regular budget won't allow for."

Kim Allman, Charlene Mellencamp, Crystal Self and Missy Woods have all decided to continue their support of Turning Point, a local shelter for victims of domestic abuse. After performing a skit emphasizing that anyone can be a victim of domestic abuse, the group presented Rhea Murray, director of Jackson County Turning Point, with more than 200 cell phones it collected during Make Seymour Shine Week. Those phones will be refurbished as 911 emergency phones and given to victims.

The group also expanded the center's use of shoe cards, which are business cards that contain information on where to go to seek help for domestic abuse. The cards are usually located in public restrooms and are small enough to fit in a shoe. Before the group came in, there were 18 locations for the cards. Now, there are 42, located across Jackson County.



Tina Stark of the Jackson County Visitor Center gives a presentation Thursday morning at the Jackson County Education Center on plans for a skate park during the Leadership Jackson County event. She was a member of this year's Leadership class.
(Tribune photo by Roxanne Allen)

"This is a topic people don't want to acknowledge," Mellencamp said. "But it's out there and you don't even realize who it's happening to. We have learned so much over the past year, and we will continue to help out in any way we can. I'm personally thankful for the opportunity that Leadership Jackson County has given me."

The women's presentation and overall effort to raise awareness of domestic abuse in Jackson County touched Murray.

"They have inspired me to want to continue our mission and devote even more of myself to it," she said. "They truly are a blessing, and we hope to continue our partnership with them and with Leadership Jackson County."

Although every group was successful in their endeavors, many had to overcome significant challenges throughout the course of the year. The group that partnered with Muscatatuck Wildlife Refuge had to contend with busy schedules, bad weather and unhelpful salesmen. After deciding they were going to build picnic tables for the refuge's family center, the rest of the plan didn't go so smoothly.

"It was cold or rainy or both every time we tried to go out there," group member Debbie Hackman said while donning a yellow rain slicker. "And then we couldn't get anyone to help us from the home improvement store with materials and instructions."

The team did finally receive donations from Polley Building Supply and Ace Hardware and they were able to construct four new picnic tables for the refuge.

"We wanted to leave our mark, and I think we did that," group member Andrew Carlson said. "This was a great experience and a great group to work with. No one complained and everyone worked together. It was a good time."

Other partnerships included Girls Inc. where group members helped pilot a leadership program for national Girls Inc. headquarters; Seymour Park and Recreation where group members researched the viability of having a skate park in Jackson County; Childcare Network where group members helped organize and conduct an All Pro Dads Event and the Community Health Center where group members helped with clinic awareness by being hosts of a Hispanic health fair and providing a display board for the center to use during presentations.