



Bernards teen gets kudos for helping girls in Africa

Ridge High School junior Shannon McNamara, wearing state and national medals as a recipient of the 2010 Prudential Spirit of Community Awards, met with Sen. Bob Menendez, D-N.J., while in Washington, D.C., on Tuesday, May 4. McNamara was in the nation's capital to receive the awards, which recognized her work to help educate girls in the east African nation of Tanzania.

By W. JACOB PERRY, Staff Writer

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BERNARDS TWP. – A local teen's success in helping to educate children in Africa has led to a series of honors and accolades in recent weeks.

It all began two years ago when Shannon McNamara, then 15, traveled with her family to the east African nation of Tanzania

and was struck by the hardships that faced youths there, particularly girls.

Upon her return here, McNamara pursued her Girl Scout Gold Award project by founding SHannon's After School Reading Exchange (SHARE) to collect books for the girls' schools.

A ripple became a wave and SHARE has since attracted more than 800 New Jersey student volunteers and raised \$80,000 while providing Tanzanian children with three new libraries, classroom renovations and 21,000 books.

McNamara, now a 17-year-old Ridge High School junior, has been honored this year by three national organizations and praised in resolutions from the township and the state Legislature.

"All the honors and recognition are unexpected," she said. "It's really humbling that people think I should get all these things for what I do.

"Every time there's an award, more people find out about SHARE and the needs of the girls in Africa," she added. "It spreads the word."

The first big honor occurred in February when McNamara was named one of the Girl Scouts' 2009 National Young Women of Distinction. She was among only 10 girls in the nation to be honored, and the only one from the Northeast.

She was then named as one of America's top 10 youth volunteers for 2010 by the Prudential Spirit of Community Awards, and was honored at a ceremony of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce in Washington, D.C., on May 3.

Later that week, McNamara was named one of 25 finalists in Build-A-Bear Workshop's national Huggable Heroes Youth Community Service Program. Ten Huggable Heroes will be chosen this month June.

‘Inspiring Work’

The accolades continued on Tuesday, May 10, when the Township Committee honored McNamara with a resolution citing her project’s “impressive achievement” and “her inspiring work.”

Ten days later, on Thursday, May 20, she and her mother, Karen, journeyed to the State House in Trenton where state Assemblywoman and township resident Denise Coyle, R-Somerset, stood up and had McNamara recognized in a Joint Legislative resolution.

“That was really cool,” said McNamara, who lives on Spring House Lane. “I had never been at the State Capital. It was kind of unreal.”

Meanwhile, SHARE’s work in Tanzania isn’t over by any means. In July, McNamara plans to make her third trip to the Tanzanian village of Bukoba and open a fourth girls’ library with additional book donations.

SHARE’s work also includes training teachers and renovating deteriorated classrooms.

“We’re trying to get electricity to the schools and upgrade them for technology,” McNamara said. She said donations continue to be sought through SHARE’s web site, www.shareinafrica.org.

With high school graduation barely a year away, she’s now evaluating colleges, with Rice University in Texas and Vanderbilt University in Tennessee being two leading contenders.

As for a major course of study, “I’m looking at a bunch of things, like teaching and philosophy, but volunteerism will always be something I’ll continue to do on the side,” she said.

“There’s something about volunteering,” she continued. “It feels good to do something that’s within your power, and help people.”