

Kirsten Young honored as 2006 A.C.E. of the Year

Kirsten Young, of Murray, Utah, accepted the 2006 National A.C.E. of the Year award at the 88th national convention in Orlando, Fla.

A.C.E. is an acronym for Accepting the Challenge of Excellence. The award recognizes high school students who have overcome difficult times and obstacles, yet managed not only to graduate from high school, but to excel.

Kirsten's childhood was one of many hardships. As a child, she endured severe punishments and endless chores on a daily basis. At 14, Kirsten was raped. She became pregnant but decided to keep the child. Even at her young age, Kirsten knew she had to be a source of hope and faith for her son and was determined to be a reliable and responsible parent.

In spite of all that has happened to Kirsten, she found a way to keep going. "Every new day is like a new riddle to solve," she said. "Every new struggle is a new challenge...I have enjoyed every obstacle, no matter how trying. This is because every time I triumph or fail, I learn a little more."

Kirsten carved out a new life for herself after she moved to Utah from Montana. A few months after her move, she enrolled

in school and found a full-time job. By working hard and looking to the future, Kirsten has graduated and is now enrolled in college. There is no doubt that Kirsten has become someone her son can look up to and be proud of.

As the National A.C.E. of the Year, Kirsten received a \$10,000 scholarship and addressed Exchangites at the National Youth Recognition Luncheon. This is the seventh annual presentation of the award, and Kirsten was selected from district finalists across America.

"To say that I am grateful for this award is not enough," said Kirsten. "Instead, I would like to tell you all why I am here. I did not get this award because I was good at sports or because I had a perfect 4.0 average, or some rare, coveted talent...I got this award because I happened to be presented with an opportunity to share with others my ambitions and values.

"I offer my deepest gratitude, and also my word that I will never let this award go to waste," she added. "It is an investment in a life that is going to impact others' lives tenfold."

The following narratives were written by Kirsten as part of her A.C.E. Award application.

Proudest moment

At 18 years of age, children become legal adults. It is then that they assume responsibility, graduate high school, go off to college, make important decisions, and take charge of their life. Well, most of them.

At 14 years of age, I was a freshman in high school. Suddenly, I found myself pregnant after being raped on a cold February night. Needless to say, my childhood ended. I then had to abandon what I knew my life to be, and change myself to become a reliable, responsible mother. My son arrived the day after Thanksgiving in 2003. He was so strong! He could grip my fingers and stand on my lap just hours after being born. At two months, he almost died from falling ill with Influenza A, Influenza B, and RSV [*respiratory syncytial virus*] all at once. But he pulled through. Imagine if I failed to become a person who could provide for him or had to face him one day and tell him I had messed up so badly that I had ruined his life. At 14, I made up my mind that I would never let this happen. If he could be this strong, so could I.

One night, I made a decision to leave Montana and come to Utah to live on my own. In the middle of the night, I packed my things and left. After four to five months, I enrolled myself in school and am currently on course to graduate. I put my nose to



Kirsten Young with 2005-2006 National Exchange Club Foundation President Charles Braddock, left, and 2005-2006 National President Steve Douglas.



Kirsten Young accepts the A.C.E. Award from Steve Douglas.

the grindstone and worked hard to become something I would be proud to show my son. In doing so, I have learned many lessons and achieved many goals, surprising even myself.

My greatest accomplishment? Becoming a mother my son could be proud of. There will be other accomplishments, no doubt, but what will they be? Well, to quote my two-year-old son, Julian (usually when he is holding a DVD), “Watch.”

How can I impact a better tomorrow?

Success, by definition, is a favorable outcome, an accomplishment with direction, or a person or thing that turned out well. As young adults, we hear from our parents and mentors that they hope we will become successful individuals as we grow up. But how may we become a success without someone there to guide, teach, and support us?


Things happen in life that cannot be prevented or changed. Unfortunately, these events can be quite crippling. Though you might not expect it, your life could change in a split second and direct you into a completely different path, one that you never would have imagined.

So many young adults or teenagers have been thrown into a new struggle by no fault of their own. They are told by ignorant people that they are failures. Without money or resources or a supportive role model, they will have no choice but to join the vicious cycle of poverty.

It is my hope to become someone of honest virtue unto myself, for that is where my control lies. To be another caring figure in the life of even one person in need, to lend support or to offer advice or resources that will help others succeed in their individual aspirations. I feel compelled to help others,

struggling in a cycle that seems to have no end, so in turn, they can become productive citizens.

Today’s youth are tomorrow’s leaders. If we help them to succeed, our community will prosper and flourish. Then we, in turn, can look back at our world and say that it has become a “thing that turned out well.” A success.

I, as one individual, can make an impact, if I so choose to find that power that lies within myself. 

**Support tomorrow’s leaders
through Exchange’s Youth program.**

**The 2006-2007 Youth of the Year
Essay Theme is**

“Lighting the Fire Within.”



Today's youth – building a stronger America through community service

By Lauren M. Hartman, 2006 National Youth of the Year

She came all the way from Kenya for a chance at a better life, a little girl who could have easily resembled one of my friends if not for the cleft palate that cruelly hindered her from talking or even smiling. My third grade class had raised money to sponsor her for Operation Smile and she was returning to visit us after her surgery. The image of her walking through our classroom door will be forever imprinted in my mind – I will never forget the joy that radiated from her beautiful, smiling face. My little heart was filled with compassion and wonder: compassion for this girl who would finally be able to experience the happiness of her childhood, and wonder that we, that I, helped it happen.

This is my first vivid memory of doing something to make an impact on someone's life, and it has stayed with me for nearly 10 years. It was in this moment that the very first seedlings of purpose were planted in my soul, seeds that with time would grow to be fundamental elements of my being. As a third grader, I don't think I fully understood the gravity of what we had done for this girl, but what I did understand is that she was happier and that we had helped her in attaining that happiness.

We're influenced by our experiences growing up, and community service is not excluded in these impressions. From a young age, we are taught to share, to give, and to help those around us. Whether in the form of a Sunday school lesson, a school project, or an act of an admired older sibling, we learn the importance of service and charity, and we keep these lessons with us as we grow into young adults and become more actively and personally involved in serving the community. Our interests and passions shape the kind of work we choose to do, whether volunteering at a homeless shelter, working at an elementary school, or helping out at a veterinary clinic. This work, in turn, shapes us into caring, compassionate, and concerned citizens. It's true that today's youth are making America stronger through service of their communities; but first, America's youth themselves are made stronger through their participation in community service.

In my experiences, the life lessons learned through volunteering carry greater significance and value than any that can be taught in the classroom. I've learned so much, not only about those around me, but about myself. I believe that you cannot volunteer without being changed in some way, however small. It's like building up a muscle; the more you work at it, the bigger



Lauren Hartman, right, and Melissa Dykhuis of Atlas World Travel, official sponsor of the National Youth of the Year Award.

it gets. This muscle is the human capacity for understanding and love for our neighbors. Whether serving the community of Poquoson distributing food and water after Hurricane Isabel, or serving our international community by supporting a child from a sister-parish in Haiti, I've felt myself grow in compassion for those around me. Volunteering is so important to the growth and development of teens because it allows us to experience the hardships of others and become more considerate of our fellow man. By instilling these values in us, serving the community makes teens into stronger, more concerned citizens who will dedicate themselves to promoting the greater good of their communities, countries, and the world.

My personal call to service is probably stronger than most. On the day that I saw the transformation of that little girl, I was filled with the desire to bring that kind of joy into people's lives. The impression she made on me was so strong that, at eight years old, I resolved to become a doctor. I wanted the power to make that kind of a difference in someone's life. Since then, I've considered other careers, but I've realized that none

could bring me the fulfillment of the medical profession. I don't think I would be satisfied with my life unless I was fully giving of myself to alleviate the pain of others. My service reflects this aspiration: I've volunteered in an emergency room, done a mentorship at a cardiology office, and helped out at a nursing home. My experiences with community service have both awakened and affirmed my desire to become a doctor and work with the underprivileged and impoverished, perhaps in a program like Operation Smile. Volunteering has made me a stronger person and a stronger member of the community, one who will work tirelessly to make a difference in the world.

Right now we're only teens, but someday we will be the doctors, the lawyers, the CEOs, and the politicians. It is important that our lives are built on a foundation of service, charity, and compassion so that we'll be honorable and humanitarian leaders. It is hard for most teens (and most people for that matter) to see how they, one insignificant person, can really make a difference. When disheartened by this thought, I have always been inspired by the words of Mother Teresa: "We ourselves feel that what we are doing is just a drop in the ocean. But the ocean would be less because of that missing drop." I take comfort in the fact that one who was so incredibly devoted to serving others also felt the same doubts about her impact on the world as I do, and I find the strength to persevere in Mother Teresa's words and example. It is so important to remember that we are all a part of this ocean, this community of the world, and that our contributions really do matter. This is one of the most important lessons that can be learned through serving others, and a lesson that I know I will carry with me throughout my life. If today's youth can learn this, if this can be entrenched in their hearts, then when the time comes for this generation to lead, we will truly make America a stronger country, its people united by the bonds of service and goodwill. 🌍

The National Youth of the Year Award provides the National Exchange Club with the opportunity to honor outstanding students who have exhibited excellence in academics and leadership. The process begins at the club level, where Exchangites recognize the young leaders in their communities. The clubs' Youths of the

Year then go on to the district level. Finally, each district's Youth of the Year competes at the national level for a \$10,000 scholarship and the opportunity to address Exchangites at the National Youth Recognition Luncheon.

Lauren Hartman, of Poquoson, Va., exemplifies the objectives of Exchange's youth program through her schoolwork, leadership, and community involvement. She attended Poquoson High School, where she was very active in many school activities, including student government, debate, music and theater. Lauren served as a student council association representative every year, and was her junior and senior class vice president. A member of the forensics team for four years, her team won their district competition two years in a row.

Using her natural talents on stage and with music, Lauren served as dance captain for two choirs. She has earned awards, including a showmanship award and a scholarship for singing.

Lauren's scholastic achievements are impressive and her high school career is marked by many high points and awards. She is a National Honor Society president and a National Merit Scholarship finalist. In addition, she is a University of Virginia Jefferson Scholarship nominee and a Presidential Scholar nominee. Lauren has also been active in several clubs, including Mu Alpha Theta Math Honor Society, Spanish Honor Society, and Thespians Dramatic Honor Society.



Lauren Hartman with, from left, 2005-2006 National President Steve Douglas, 2005-2006 Foundation President Charles Braddock, her parents, and her Exchange Club sponsors.