

Optimists celebrate outstanding kids with Children's Challenge Awards

BY KAREN BILLING

The Del Mar/Solana Beach Optimist Club's 36th annual Vic Kops Children's Challenge Awards were held at the Lomas Santa Fe Country Club on May 23. The club honored nine students for their accomplishments in the categories of fellowship, courage, art, science and community service with a breakfast ceremony and a \$100 prize.

"You are without a doubt, the best there is," Optimist Club President Sam Junk told the winning students.

The awards carry on the legacy of Optimist Vic Kops, a Del Mar psychologist who founded the awards as a way to honor elementary school kids in a league all their own. Kops died suddenly at age 61 in 2007, two weeks after presenting that year's Children's Challenge Awards; Optimist Susan Pflieger has been the dedicated chairman of the awards since then and calls it her favorite morning of the year.

"You will leave this morning feeling 10 feet tall," Pflieger said. "You feel good about the world and the young people we've got taking over"

Fellowship: Tyler Cole, Ocean Air School fifth grader

Tyler's teacher Tanya Lubomudrov said Tyler is the perfect example of companionship and camaraderie. As a "first responder and true hero," Tyler is always looking to step in and help fellow students and teachers without ever being asked. At school he makes sure no one sits alone at lunch and in his neighborhood when he found out his neighbor's young daughter

passed away, he made picture frames and sold door-to-door to raise money for the family.

When his own grandfather passed away recently, Tyler recalled that his grandfather had always prepared his grandmother's tea.

"He knew she had been missing that. Every morning he gets up and makes her tea," Lubomudrov said. "No one asked him to do that. He knew she would be missing that touch of love and as a first responder and true hero he wanted to provide that for his grandmother."

Courage: Caden Timmer, Sycamore Ridge School sixth grader

Last year Caden was diagnosed with leukemia and overnight his whole life changed, said mother Anjuli. He was taken out of school for a year but kept up his studies at home so he was able to rejoin his sixth grade class this year, helping his classmates understand what he had learned about cancer.

"Over the past year and a half he has been poked and prodded, stayed in the hospital and taken more pills than others take in their entire life but he has done it with the best attitude, he's so positive," said Anjuli. "He never once asked 'Why is this happening to me?' He did everything with such a positive attitude that we couldn't really feel bad for ourselves either if he wasn't. He has carried all of us through this past year."

Courage: Nathan Gordon, Ashley Falls School second grader

The Optimist Club was not sure that Nathan would be able to join them on May 23 as he just had spinal surgery the week before but Nathan



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Children's Challenge Award winners (back row): Tyler Cole, Lily Pippel, Emma Demirovic, Madison Mendoza and Sophie Keller. Front row: West Stefany, Nathan Gordon, Sharkey Brumond and Caden Timmer.

bounced back and attended the ceremony with a full entourage.

Neighbor Linda Liu nominated the cheerful Nathan neighbor for the award. After being diagnosed with a rare tumor on his spinal cord at 15 months old, he has gone through multiple treatments and a dozen surgeries. One of his most recent surgeries required Nathan to wear a brace for several months but not once did Liu see him complain.

She said he is a great role model for her daughter and shows a lot of patience, teaching her to do a basketball bounce pass and make rainbow loom bracelets.

"He has met his challenges with extraordinary resilience and bravery," said Liu.

Community service: Sophie Keller, Del Mar Heights School sixth grader

Del Mar Heights special day class teacher Alaina Symes said Sophie has formed an amazing bond as a buddy to second grader Tommy, who is mostly non-verbal. Sophie visits

Tommy to help him in class and to play games.

"It's amazing to see how he just lights up when he sees her," Symes said. "She's patient, she's kind and this relationship they have formed is just amazing to watch."

Science: West Stefany, Sycamore Ridge first grader

Science teacher Shawn Green said West is one the most curious and passionate people he has ever met. He realized when West was in kindergarten that his understanding of scientific concepts was well beyond his age. West already has a YouTube channel and has written books about science and Green said he blows his mind on a daily basis.

"I often lose track of the fact that he's just a first grader, he's unbelievably intelligent," Green said. "Every time I see West he's bubbling with excitement to tell me about his newest discovery or newest experiment...he's an exceptionally bright young man that is going to

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Expires: 6/17/2018 PLU #8840

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