

Teens spend summer in community-building projects



Bill Wade/Post-Gazette

Ron Lincoski, Jr., 16, at the West Pike Run Community Honor Roll in Daisytown. He organized the restoration of the memorial for his Eagle Boy Scout project. He is a member of Troop 1423 in California, Pa.

By Janice Crompton
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

If you ask West Pike Run Supervisor Rick Molish or personal care home owner Dawn Leyda, they'd say teenagers Ron Lincoski and J.J. Cullen are just about the best thing to happen to their communities lately.

Yes, Ron and J.J. are teenagers. And even though they could be passing the summer vegging out in front of the television or hanging around the mall, the two spend much of their time volunteering and helping others.

For their efforts, the young men, both 16-year-old juniors this year at California Area High School, were recently recognized by the Challenge Program with community service awards.

J.J. was given the award for putting in more than 200 hours of volunteer time with the Roscoe Volunteer Fire

Department, where he has spent much of the summer, and for volunteering at a personal care home, where he visits and performs for patients.

Ron undertook a \$20,000 project to revitalize a war memorial in the village of Daisytown in West Pike Run.

The Challenge Program is a Johnstown-based, nonprofit organization that partners local businesses with schools to teach students entrepreneurship while motivating them to excel in the classroom and in their communities. Students are rewarded with \$250 for their excellence in community service, school attendance, most improved grade point average, and highest grade point average.

Along with the California Area School District in Washington County, several other districts in Fayette



Annie O'Neill/Post-Gazette

California High School junior J. J. Cullen recently was honored for his volunteer work with the Roscoe Fire Department, where he runs the radios, and for his volunteer work at a personal care home. He's 16, has brittle bone disease, and is in a wheelchair.

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County have participated in the program.

J.J. has completed fire support and basic training programs, and is learning to operate the fire company's radio and communications system. He spends about 11 hours a day at the fire department.

"I love it so much," he said.

J.J.'s work is all the more remarkable because he has suffered with brittle bone disease his whole life, along with his mother Susan and 10-year-old

brother Christopher.

He uses a wheelchair, which he motors eight blocks every day from his home in Elco to the fire department.

Working at a department probably isn't the safest environment for J.J., who can break bones just by breathing too deeply.

"I can cough any day and break a rib," he said.

Brittle bone disease, or osteogenesis imperfecta, is a rare genetic disorder that causes bones to break easily due to low levels of collagen, a protein that

connects body tissues, bones and muscles.

In J.J.'s case, he breaks an average of six or seven bones each year, including once breaking his shoulder while rolling over in bed.

Most recently, his motorized wheel chair stalled and stopped abruptly, which ended up fracturing both of his hips and knees.

It's a painful disorder, but not one that will stop J.J. from pursuing his interests. He has every reason to be crippled with fear about the outside world, and

even everyday living, but he said he is determined to be independent, even planning to commute to college after graduation.

He's taking special driving courses to learn automotive hand controls, thanks to the school district, which agreed last year to pay part of his driver's education classes in lieu of a classroom aide, normally required for disabled students.

"I thought I could be independent," said J.J., who named James Joseph Cullen III, after his father, who takes J.J. to Erie for the driving classes. "I went

to the school district and asked them to dismiss my aide. I just want to be a normal kid."

J.J. hopes to get his license, which requires 50 course hours, in time to drive to school in his senior year of high school.

He's also volunteered since he was 6 years old at Flo's Personal Care Home in Elco, where he's considered a star by residents.

"He's actually dressed up like Elvis Presley and sang for people's birthdays," said Ms. Leyda, the home's owner. "They love him. It's a nice thing for them, because many of them are depressed."

J.J. said he likes spending time at the personal care home because it livens up the residents.

"They don't have a lot of family members," he said. "Some of them don't even visit."

J.J. plans to attend Point Park University after graduation, and pursue a career in sports management.

"I'm a fan of pretty much all sports," J.J. said, although he said he intends to focus on football, representing as many Steelers as possible.

Ron wanted to tidy up the local war memorial in Daisytown for a Boy Scout Eagle project, but the project blossomed from pulling weeds and clearing brush to a full-blown renovation

lighting. Ron spent more than 450 hours renovating the memorial, built in 1945 to honor World War I and World War II veterans. Memorials for veterans of the Korean and Vietnam wars were added later. About 415 veterans are honored by name on a bronze plaque.

Ron raised money for the project, and collected donated materials from area businesses, along with organizing volunteers in the community and through the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts.

After the project was completed last month, Ron held a rededication ceremony that drew hundreds of residents, officials, veterans and active-duty troops.

Mrs. Lincoski estimates just about each of the town's 356 residents showed up for the ceremony.

"It was the only time many neighbors got to get together," she said.

Ron said he thought of doing a simpler project - building a park pavilion in Charleroi - but driving by the memorial made him realize his hometown needed his help more.

"It was in bad shape. It just didn't catch your eye and it wasn't very friendly," he said. "This seemed a lot more meaningful."