

Student's letter was a springboard

Kayla Pongrac is only 18 years old, but she has had her own column in a local newspaper for more than a year.

The opportunity came to Kayla partly due to her participation with The Challenge Program Inc. at Shade-Central City High School.

During the program's first year of operation at Shade-Central City, Kayla won The Challenge Program's award for Most Community Service - Sophomore, and was encouraged by TCP staff to write a thank-you letter to Hank Parke of PBS Coals, who is the business ambassador at Shade-Central City.

"Kayla's thank-you letter stood out as being something sincere, not something that she felt like she had to do," Parke recalled.

"Her letter was very detailed as to what she felt the benefits of The Challenge Program were not only to her, but to the rest of the student body. By the quality and the content of the writing, I had assumed that she was a senior who had just graduated from high school."

The thank-you letter impressed Parke so much that he invited Kayla to a business breakfast held at the Georgian Place in Somerset.

There, he read Kayla's letter to the



THE CHALLENGE PROGRAM

Kayla Washko

breakfast's attendees. The letter, which contained mention of Kayla's aspiration to become a journalist someday, caught the attention of a local editor.

"Kayla really stands as an example to young people, that if you are really sincere and speak from the heart, you can be successful," Parke said.

Aside from some sporadic songwriting in her younger years, Kayla's fascination with writing began during her freshman English class, when she was asked to write a three-page composition about Romeo and Juliet.

After grading the compositions, Kayla's teacher took her aside to tell her that it was one of the best papers he had seen written by a ninth-grader.

He also encouraged her to continue

"Music was the first major thing that inspired me. It's been my best friend through everything."

**KAYLA PONGRAC,
CHALLENGE PROGRAM
AWARD WINNER**

developing her talent by taking a creative writing class.

Now, Kayla says that she has the support of the whole English department and many of her fellow students. She even has been voted "Most Likely to Become Famous" by the senior class.

"People tell me I can do something with the ideas I put on paper," Kayla said. "It's good to have support."

Kayla plans to attend Pitt-Johnstown in the fall to major in journalism or writing. She hopes to become a music journalist.

"Music was the first major thing that inspired me," Kayla said. "It's been my

best friend through everything."

Kayla is honored that her family, friends and teachers believe that she will be successful in her pursuit of a writing career.

But she says that she "never wants to forget where she came from," and that is why it is so important for her to continue doing community service.

She volunteers with Habitat for Humanity, the Humane Society, the American Red Cross, the American Legion and Richland's annual Light the Night Walk, among others. As a junior, Kayla received The Challenge Program's Most Community Service award for the second year in a row.

This article is part of a human interest series that will feature past recipients of The Challenge Program's four award categories: Most Improved, Best G.P.A., Most Community Service, and Best Attendance. The Challenge Program is a nonprofit organization located in Johnstown that provides financial incentives to students for successes they achieve while still in high school. The Challenge Program also aims to provide a bridge between high school students and the local business community.