



ARLENE JOHNS/THE TRIBUNE-DEMOCRAT

Scott Becker, president and CEO of Conemaugh Health System, and Barb Grandinetti, executive director of The Challenge Program, talk to students on Friday at the annual Student Networking Event, held in conjunction with Showcase for Commerce.

'This is our future'

The Challenge Program students network at Showcase

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This year, its sixth year of operation, The Challenge Program gave its millionth dollar to a hard-working student.

Started by Johnstown businessman Dan Perkins, founder and chairman of MTS Technologies, the program gives direct monetary rewards to high school students while pairing them with business leaders.

On Friday, students, educators and business sponsors took part in the annual Student Networking Event, held in conjunction with Showcase for Commerce.

Sponsored by Northrop Grumman and held in the new Greater Johnstown Technology Park, the event gave the kids a chance to meet with benefactors and learn more about businesses in the region.

"I wanted to see if there are job opportunities around here," Jazmine Mock, a Conemaugh Township junior attending Greater Johnstown Career and Technology Center, said.

Mock, who is interested in a career in the medical field, was able to meet Scott Becker, president and CEO of Conemaugh Health System.

"This is our future," Becker said. "(It's

one of the best things we can do to keep these young minds in our community."

U.S. Rep. John Murtha, D-Johnstown, was the featured speaker at the event.

He encouraged the young people to "make a difference" and spoke of his pride in Perkins, whom he had mentored as a young boy looking to shine shoes at Murtha's car wash.

Bill Moynihan, Northrop Grumman program director, also spoke to the group.

"I challenge you to find something that matters," he urged the students. "You will be successful when you know the things you do matter."

Perkins started The Challenge Program with one school - Bishop McCort High School.

"I envisioned one school," he said. "I'd use my own money."

The next year there were five schools involved, and he sought help from other businessmen.

This year, 109 schools from 20 Pennsylvania counties, along with schools in West Virginia and Delaware, participated. An additional 35 schools are on the list to be included next year if businesses can be found to sponsor them. Currently more

than 100 businesses provide funding for the program.

Barb Grandinetti, executive director, said the program's growth is beyond the organization's wildest expectations.

TCP gives \$250 awards to students in four categories - community service, most-improved grade, best overall grade point average and attendance.

Checks are given to the top sophomores, juniors and seniors in each participating school.

The money can be used for whatever the child wants - continuing education, a new computer or even to pay for food or other necessities, Grandinetti said.

"We award kids who may never get an award," she said.

Perkins does not seek affirmation for the good works and readily credits the staff for the success.

For him, an occasional note from a grateful youngster is enough.

On Friday, he was given an appreciation plaque and a standing ovation.

"Your investment in our lives has really made a difference," Jasmine Narcisse, a senior at Greater Johnstown High School, said as she handed the gift to Perkins.