

'We're still learning'

The Challenge Program reaches 125 schools in three states

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When Barbara Grandinetti was approached to help create and run a non-profit, she was skeptical.

Her background was in business.

"I don't know anything about non-profits," Grandinetti admitted from her office at The Challenge Program in the Commerce Centre on Board Street.

"I think a lot of our success came because I didn't know I couldn't."

If success is measured in lives impacted, the program has been a winner.

Letters and cards from the thousands of students touched by TCP adorn the office walls and spill from scrapbooks. Dozens of letters from businesses and school superintendents give testimony to a program that works.

From its humble beginning in one Johnstown school, the program now reaches into 21 counties in three states and into 125 schools. There are more than 100 schools on a waiting list.

The idea came from businessman Dan Perkins' desire to mentor young people.

Perkins, chairman and CEO of MTS Technologies, grew up in Johnstown's Prospect section and became an entrepreneur at the age of 8, shining shoes in Central Park. Today, he runs a company that employs nearly 200.

As a child, Perkins was befriended by the late U.S. Rep John P. Murtha. The relationship changed Perkins' life and he wanted to be able to do that for other young people.

In 2003, he made his way to Bishop McCort and told his story to the student body.

Perkins told the kids of his humble start and gave them advice for future success.

But he did something else. Perkins promised the kids he would return at the end of the year and reward those who had

worked the hardest.

Although they doubted he would return, Perkins was back in the spring with \$250 checks for some grateful students.

"It was like the Academy Awards," Perkins said of the experience. "The whole auditorium went wild."

These days, businesses "adopt" a school - providing \$3,000 for the rewards and mentoring students along the way.

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**BARBARA GRANDINETTI,
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
THE CHALLENGE PROGRAM**

Grandinetti sees it as a win-win situation.

Students are given cash to spend as they wish, while businesses are given the opportunity to groom future employees.

"We tell the businesses that they can help create the future work force that they're going to need," Grandinetti said.

Very often a business leader is paired with their alma mater or in their home school district.

"I think the reason this works is that people want to give money to the community where they live," Grandinetti said.

Awards are given in four categories: Academic excellence, community service, attendance and academic improvement.

Four awards go to sophomore, junior and senior classes in each school.

The community service category has resulted in thousands of hours of volunteerism.

"You can't go through life with catchers mitts on both hands," Grandinetti said she tell students. "You've got to throw something back."

Raising the money needed to run the nonprofit and for the student awards is challenging but Grandinetti said her staff of five is getting better at finding funds.

"I think we're very diversified in our fundraising," she said.

Several months ago, TCP received a \$51,000 grant from Walmart Foundation and also received funding from Pittsburgh's Benedum Foundation.

Additional donations come from businesses, state and federal grants as well as from individual gifts.

A lot has changed in the few short years TCP has been in operation.

These days, Grandinetti said the focus is on teaching financial literacy to students.

She is excited about a new concept started at a school in West Virginia. With help from TCP, a student-run credit union was set up in the school.

Grandinetti hopes the idea catches on and said Gap Credit Union will partner with a local school in the fall.

Grandinetti said she and her staff work hard to meet the needs of students and businesses while trying to expand the program into as many schools as want to participate.

"We obviously are constantly looking at the program, how we can improve it, streamline it," Grandinetti said.

"We're still learning."

For additional information on The Challenge Program, call 533-7401 or go to www.tcpinc.org.

Frequent columns about the program appear in The Tribune-Democrat's Sunday Business section.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

The Challenge Program provided this group photo of some of the people who keep the nonprofit student mentoring program rolling. They are (seated, from left), Sarah Hollis, office administrator, and Karen Robatin, director of finance; and (standing, from left) Renee Shaw, director of program development; Elson Kwon, IT coordinator; and Barbara Grandinetti, executive director.