

Freeport Area student rises to The Challenge

By R.A. Monti

Friday, March 14, 2014, 1:26 a.m.



When Valerie Delk won The Challenge Program, Inc. award for “Most Improved Student” at Freeport Area High School last year, the \$250 that went along with the award was a nice prize.

But it wasn't the cash that drove Delk to keep improving herself as a student.

“At first, I wanted the money,” said Delk, 18, of Buffalo Township. “But then everyone seemed so proud of me and told me how good of a job I did.

“It became about more than money.”

That improvement paid off in an even bigger way Thursday when Delk was named “Student of the Year,” by the nonprofit organization that partners with businesses to reward students for hard work.

Delk was selected over almost 1,500 students from around the Mid-Atlantic Region as the result of a thank-you letter she wrote to the program.

Mike Kleckner, assistant principal at the high school, taught Delk when she was in sixth grade. He's had the best view of her improvement as a student who once skipped school and failed classes to one who now earns As and Bs.

“The turnaround Valerie has made to better herself is inspiring,” Kleckner said. “She was always a good student, but she made the effort to be better prepared and to do it on a consistent level.

“She did what was needed to be better.”

Mary Dreliszak, director of program development and public relations for The Challenge Program, said Delk is a model for what the program looks for in students.

“Valerie exemplifies the spirit of ‘The Challenge,’” said Dreliszak moments before presenting Delk with her an invitation to a May 1 award ceremony at a Green Tree hotel. “She made an effort to change her habits.

“We are so proud of her.”

This award doesn't come with a cash prize, but it will look good on a college application, Dreliszak said.

Dreliszak presented the invitation alongside employees of Quality Life Services, the company that sponsors The Challenge Program at Freeport Area.

“(The award) means a lot to me,” Delk said shyly. “It will help me get into college.

“I want to go to the University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown,” she said. “To study to be a veterinarian.”

‘It wasn't easy’

Delk said changing years of poor studying habits and changing her classroom demeanor were things she thought she needed to accomplish to be a better student. “It wasn't easy,” she said with a chuckle and a sigh. “When you go through two years of high school without doing anything, you have to work really hard to get back into the swing of things.

“I also tried to improve my attitude,” she continued. “I wanted teachers to like me.

“Teachers have a big impact on students and their learning.”

Freeport Area High School Principal Jeff Lesko said Delk's story should be used as an example for all students. “She's overcome a lot of circumstances,” he said. “Valerie has shown a ton of growth.

“She's a perfect example of what hard work and being able to persevere can do.”

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