

# Community service team recognized as top ambassador school

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Students are often asked to leave a lasting mark within the walls of their high school.

But for one group of Brownsville Area students, their contribution will extend beyond the confines of the school grounds and into their community.

For the past year, the Students in Action team at Brownsville Area High School has worked on creating a master plan for the revitalization of the downtown area.

Their efforts are being recognized not only within the community of Brownsville, but nationally, as the team was named the Top Ambassador school this year through the Jefferson Awards for Public Service.

“It’s so easy for the people of Brownsville to say nothing happens in this town,” said group sponsor, Kelli Dellarose. “So it’s really nice that people on the outside are able to really tell these students how hard they’ve worked, and really give them the recognition they deserve.”

Founded in 1972, the Jefferson Awards for Public Service is currently operating in more than 325 high schools nationwide and in 13 regions.

The Brownsville team competed at a regional level the first few years. However, in 2014, they were recognized for the first time as an ambassador-level school.



## Revitalizing a community

Jenna Shumar, left, and Alexa Sharpe, both senior members of Students in Action at Brownsville Area High School, look at the stage in the original model of a revitalization project for downtown Brownsville. The team has been named the Top Ambassador school this year through the Jefferson Awards for Public Service for its community rehabilitation efforts. Kelly Tunney| Herald-Standard

This year, the students submitted an online application and created a video with Emmy award-winning producer, Emma Alaquiva. The video, which can be viewed here, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bA-Yrm\\_WIik](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bA-Yrm_WIik), details the current team's efforts to build upon the work of past SIA teams.

"It's been an amazing process," said Kelsey Wolfe, a junior on the team. "When I first heard of the program, I thought it was great way to build our community back up. To be able to do a project, like this, that can inspire other people around the nation to do similar things is an amazing feeling."

### **Bigger and better**

The project had very humble beginnings.

The first SIA team, four years ago, set a goal to clean up some of the dilapidated areas in town, and reuse and recycle some of the garbage that they found in a park. The focal point of the park would have been the base of a old trailer for a stage.

But a meeting of Brownsville Borough Council changed all of that.

"Once everyone started to put their minds together, this went from a small little project of cleaning up some trash, to a huge hundred-thousand-dollar project," Dellarose said. "It just kept getting bigger, and bigger, and bigger as time went on."

The cleanup project has turned into Operation Falcon Revitalization — a master plan to revitalize the downtown area. It will be carried out in a series of four phases over a period of 10 to 15 years, beginning with the construction of a stage in Snowden Square.

Through this project, the SIA team has learned to work with organizations, elected officials and business owners to secure donations and grants. To date, they have raised more than \$100,000 toward the project.

This year, the team, whose members are Wolfe, Alexandria Seto, Morgan Sheranek, Lanieta Waqanivalu, Jenna Shumar and Alexa Sharpe, was awarded \$50,000 from the Heinz Endowments.

The students have also worked with local engineering firm, McMillen Engineering, Inc., to develop the layout of the park and the Redevelopment Authority of Fayette County, who owns the property that will house the park.

"This project has really brought together so many different people in the community to finally agree on something to make the community a better place," Dellarose said.

“The students were the ones who brought everybody together.”

According to Dellarose, McMillen Engineering, Inc. and the Redevelopment Authority have kept the students involved every step of the way.

“Terry (McMillen) makes time to meet with the students to make sure that every single aspect of the park reflects what the students want it to be,” she said.

Planners and borough officials reviewed the master plan at a meeting in April.

Now, with \$300,000 in state and foundation grants in hand, the Fayette County Redevelopment Authority is looking for an engineering firm to design the stage.

Construction is expected to begin in the fall and will proceed regardless of when or if grant funding is secured for the other phases.

By November or December the borough will find out if the state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) has approved its \$50,000 grant application for the second phase, which is renovating Central Park. The third phase included the restoration of Dunlap Creek, and the fourth and final phase will be additional, long-term enhancements to Snowden Square.

“It’s been absolutely exhilarating to see that these students can make such a difference at such a young age,” Dellarose said. “I think that’s what has led to the success of this project. Because without the students, no one was willing to come together, to put together everyone’s ideas and make a difference.”

The current team of six students will be honored at the Jefferson Awards National Ceremonies dinner in Washington, D.C. next month. The cost of only two students and the team’s sponsor was covered.

However, the Jefferson Awards Foundation is only able to provide enough funding for two students and one chaperone to attend the ceremonies. A GoFundMe account has been started the hope of sending the remaining team members. In eight days, \$1,270 has been raised.

“When we go to conferences, we hear people say, ‘Oh, you’re the Brownsville kids,’” Wolfe said. “That’s an odd feeling coming from here, but it’s a good one.”