



(l-r) Melissa Brown and Hailey Allgood.
Photo by Martin Boling

Youth Learn Leadership Skills While Serving Community

Pink Penguin, Super Sally, and Jungle Jim, all wearing capes and masks made by hand, are superheroes with superpowers. Thanks to a group of talented Bloomington middle school students, these heroic characters are coming to life for children who've been abused or neglected.

After reading about Susie's Place Child Advocacy Center, which provides forensic interviews and coordinated services for the investigation of alleged crimes against children, the student participants in the 2016–17 Judy O'Bannon Youth Leadership Academy (YLA) saw a community need and acted on it. They developed the superhero project to reach kids who are facing trauma and

need heroes. YLA is hosted by Ivy Tech Community College Bloomington.

"We knew that the idea of superheroes was empowering to anyone," says Hailey Allgood, 14, who attended Batchelor Middle School while taking part in the project. Hailey will be a Bloomington High School South freshman this fall. "We thought the idea of superheroes would especially help these kids feel more powerful," she says.

Her group of five students created 25 superheroes, wrote their special powers on cards, and made capes out of T-shirts and masks out of felt. Each superhero kit—card, cape, and mask—was included in a special backpack, along with superhero comic books. The backpacks are being given to clients at Susie's Place. Hailey was among 20 students participating in the third year of the free



Blaise Oeding. Photo by Martin Boling

Leadership Academy, funded by Ivy Tech. Named in honor of former Indiana first lady Judy O'Bannon, the program is designed to foster civic commitment and engagement among area seventh- and eighth-graders.

During three all-day fall sessions, students engage in leadership development activities and listen to community speakers. Beginning in January, students meet twice monthly with Ivy Tech mentors in small groups to problem-solve issues faced by local youth, and to select and develop projects addressing their needs. They present these projects at an Ivy Tech public event in April.

For Hailey, the program and speakers helped her realize that she and other youth could take action to resolve community needs. She says through YLA she learned how to better communicate with others, reach a consensus in a group, and speak publicly. But Hailey says she was most pleased with helping children served by Susie's Place. "We wanted to make them feel like somebody cared about them," she says.

Melissa Brown, a forensic interviewer at Susie's Place, located at 365 S. Park Ridge Road, says the backpacks are doing just that and, coincidentally, tie into the superhero theme the organization has selected this year. "It's such a blessing," Brown says. "They can put on their capes and masks and escape from reality for a little bit and think about something fun."

Another YLA project focused on Head Start, a federal program that provides early childhood education. Students involved with this project sponsored a book drive at Jackson Creek and Tri-North middle schools and at Ivy Tech. They collected more than 300 donated books, repaired them when necessary, and organized an event where preschool children could select books.

Blaise Oeding, 13, who will be a Jackson Creek eighth-grader this fall, feels it's important to support single mothers struggling to raise their children, so he was glad his group decided on this project. Blaise says the project helped him learn the many skills involved in leadership, from making sure everyone has a voice to respecting other people's opinions to taking charge when a leadership vacuum exists. "It was a real learning experience for me, and I gained better communication skills," Blaise says.

Blaise's mother, Allison Oeding, says the program had a significant impact on Blaise. "He had to hear and understand different points of view and find purpose in other people's ideas," she says. "It put them in real-life situations where they had to compromise."

Noor Al Risi, 14, attended Jackson Creek Middle School and will be a Bloomington High School South freshman this fall. She says the program helped her learn more about listening to others' opinions and about the importance of contributing to the community. Noor,



Noor Al Risi.
Courtesy photo

who helped develop the book drive idea, finished the program pleased with her accomplishments. "I feel reading is important for everyone," she says. "It was really exciting to see the children pick out the books."

Her mother, Samira Al Hosni, says a program like this enhances self-esteem and helps children develop the aspiration to give to others. "They realize there is something they can do," she says.

Applications for the 2017-18 Judy O'Bannon Youth Leadership Academy are now available and all area students in Grades 7 and 8 are eligible. To apply, visit ivytech.edu/obannon and click on Youth Leadership Academy. For more information, contact Jennifer Daily-Mantha at jdailymantha@ivytech.edu or 812-330-6006. —Barb Berggoetz •

Judy O'Bannon Youth Leadership Academy

Apply Now

All area students, grades 7-8, are encouraged to apply for this free leadership program. The application deadline is September 8, 2017.

Download an application at ivytech.edu/obannon (Click Youth Leadership Academy.)

Questions can be directed to Jennifer Daily-Mantha at jdailymantha@ivytech.edu or (812) 330-6006.



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