

Evanston Youth Club holds annual banquet

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EVANSTON — The Evanston Youth Club for Boys and Girls held its fourth annual banquet and program on Friday, April 28, at the Machine Shop.

This year's theme for the banquet was "Rise Up," and featured inspirational essay readings by 2016 Youth of the Year Jose Echeverria, as well as from the six Youth of the Year contestants: Aimee Skaggs, Sara Dodsworth, Isabelle Dumont, Fernando Sanchez, Nayeli Mota and Mallory Youngren.

The program began with an invocation led by local pastor Doug Cox, followed by the presentation of the flags by local law enforcement and first responders, and the National Anthem played by club member Jordan Bowie.

Attendees who packed the Machine Shop were served a lovely dinner catered by the Youth Cooking Club, as various Youth Club board members presented awards and shared the impact the kids have made on their lives.

"When I first started with the Youth Club, I could see the impact," said board member Kevin Kallas. "Now I can feel the impact."

Impact is what each of the six students up for the 2017 Youth of the Year expressed. Each of the six finalists had to complete an essay incorporating how the theme and the Youth Club have impacted their lives.

They also presented their essays to the panel of judges, selected by the club board.

This year's judges were Tim Beppler, Gary Spencer, ShanDee Welling, Mike Williams, Jay Dee Nielsen, Ryan Thomas and Caroline Goick.

Students were also required to complete an eight-hour community service project, to help them better understand the impact they could have on others.

The first student to speak was Jose Echeverria, the 2016 Youth of the Year winner. Through tears, he shared the story of finding out his father had died.

"One day I went to the club, like normal," he said. "When I came home there were police cars all around and they told me my father had died."

Echeverria said through it all, his family, friends and the youth club were there for him.

"Sometimes, we need others to help us rise," he said. "They believed in me when I couldn't believe in myself. ... Together, we can rise up."

Many of the youth shared stories about rising up above bullying, depression and fear.

Aimee Skaggs said communication was important in any relationship, and she had been able to, with help from the club, rise above negative and hurtful communication.

"I can rise above difficult times. I can rise up against bullying," she said. "I can rise up and be the person I want to be."

Skaggs said rising up is also about helping others.

"I see my mom rise up every day. She is the best example in my life," she said.

Sara Dodsworth said she also had to deal with bullying, and has been able to look back at the scars and know she made it through. She encouraged everyone to stand up for themselves and appreciate who they are.

"People will define you by how you rise up after a fall," said Dodsworth. "There were people there for me at the club."

Isabelle Dumont — or Izzy, as she likes to be called — said she wouldn't have been there that evening if it hadn't been for the club.

She spoke about her fear of being judged by others, but how rising above the fear has opened up a whole new world for her. She said people need to be open to ideas and the opinions of others, because it can teach them new things.

“The more ideas, the better the outcome,” she said. “It is the little things that count.”

Dumont ended her essay by saying the club is a home and second family to her and she is so glad to be a part of it.

Fernando (Ferny) Sanchez said, “In a perfect family, there would be a mom, dad and siblings — but that’s not what I have.”

He said one can rise up, even when there isn’t a picture-perfect family; and when he doesn’t feel good about himself, he knows he can improve in areas.

“The sun will rise in the morning,” he said. “I don’t need a dad to be a good person. I can rise up.”

Mallory Youngren was visibly moved as she began to speak, but club CEO (and friend) Holly Slade stood by her and encouraged her to continue.

“I have become a person I love,” she said. “2017 is my year. Anxieties and fears will not overtake me. I will rise up above fear, anxiety and depression.”

Youngren said she’s met many inspiring people and kids at the club, and wants to do the same for others.

“I want to help inspire as many people as I can,” she said. “I know I have something to offer.”

Each of these youth has faced hardships many others will never have to deal with, such as Nayeli Mota, the 2017 Youth of the Year award winner, who shared her story of dealing with discrimination.

“People think they know who I am and the type person I am,” she said. “My race doesn’t define who I am. ... I will rise above [discrimination].”

She said there are three options every person has: they can give up, give it all they’ve got or give in.

“The club has helped me make good choices and get better grades,” she said. “As long as I set my mind to it, I can accomplish anything. I want to help other rise up. I won’t give up. I choose to give it all I’ve got.”

Special awards were presented to Wyoming Sportsmen for Hunting and Fishing and Bohica Construction for giving their time and money to help support the club.

Slade presented the award to Bohica Construction.

Her passion for the organization and the youth was evident as she held back tears, explaining to the audience the many thousands of dollars Bohica Construction has donated in architectural services toward the expansion project.

“The expansion will allow us to add 10,000 square feet to our club,” she said. “It will allow us to fulfill our mission and values, and provide more programs for our youth.”

Before the final presentation of the night, motivational speaker and Evanston resident Sterling Mack addressed the crowd. Mack shared his story of growing up in Louisiana with his grandmother.

“I never knew my father,” he said, “and my mom was a drug addict.”

He spoke of abuse, drugs and homelessness; yet, he was able to weave in humor while telling his story of hardship.

Mack said he was determined he was going to do something to take care of his family, and he was the first person to graduate college. Today, he owns his own business and cares for a younger cousin.

“You can stand strong and move forward. Rise up and don’t depend too much on others,” he said.

He exhorted the audience to come together, stay together and become one, so many young people like him can be helped.

“I’m jealous, because I didn’t have a Boys & Girls Club to go to,” he said. “We need to come together as one. I am trying to help everyone I can.”

Closing out the evening, board member Kevin Kallas began listing each youth club member by name, sharing the personal impact the organization has had on each kid.

As Kallas said their names, each youth walked up on the stage. Club members Bailey Burcell, Madison Greene, Jordan Bowie, Juan Cheverria and Alex Zazueta sang “Rise Up” by Andra Day. A third verse, written by club member Jordan Bowie, was added to the song.

The verse says, “If you feel you’re in a dark place, and you feel like there’s nowhere else you can go, Understand that you’re a fighter, and the whole world will bow down to your feet.”

As all of the students made it to the platform, they all began to sing the chorus of the song:

“And I’ll rise up, I’ll rise like the day.

“I’ll rise up, I’ll rise unafraid.

“I’ll rise up, and I’ll do it again a thousand times again.

“I’ll rise up, high like the waves.

“I’ll rise up, in spite of the ache.

“I’ll rise up, and I’ll do it a thousand times again.”