



Scholarship program honors first recipients

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NORTHPORT -- Founders of the Northport Promise knew a year ago they had to raise a lot of money to follow through on their pledge to offer college scholarships to graduating seniors.

So they held clothing sales and a silent auction and convinced local businesses to donate a portion of their profits to the effort, modeled after a similar Promise fund in Kalamazoo.

Now \$20,000 strong, organizers hope it will continue to grow -- especially now that students are starting to benefit.

Northport seniors Ryan Blessing, Octavia Buss, Sophia Mosher, Rose Petoskey, Eddie Gonzalez, Basil Stowe and Betsy Shiner are the first recipients of the Northport Promise, which awards students up to \$2,000 annually for college based on how long they attend Northport schools.

They were recognized at a senior awards ceremony Thursday night.

"We've helped a lot with it, so it's neat to get part of it back," said Shiner, 18, who has attended Northport Public School since the fifth grade.

She and her classmates in the National Honor Society raised about \$500 for the fund through a spaghetti dinner.

"It would definitely be a good incentive to move here," she said.

Students are eligible for Promise scholarships if they attend school in Northport for at least four full years prior to graduation and are accepted to a postsecondary institution in Michigan. They are renewable so long as the students meet certain grade and credit hour requirements.

The scholarship amount is based on the number of years in the district, with at least 12 years required to earn the full \$2,000. The remaining amounts are based on a scale.

Five of this year's recipients will earn the full amount. Two will earn 85 percent and 75 percent of it, respectively.

The goal of the Promise is to boost enrollment in Northport schools and encourage families with young children to move to the area, said Ruth Steele Walker, who works with the program.

At least one family moved into the district because of the Promise, she said, and four new children are enrolled in the district.

"We know that it's working," Walker said. "We're delighted to have them, and we look forward to more."

Steve and Brenda Adams made the move to Northport from suburban Toledo, Ohio, prior to the start of the school year in part because of the Promise. Their four children, in kindergarten through 10th grade, all attend the school.

The family has vacationed in the area for 20 years, but decided to stay for good when they learned about the scholarship fund.

"We've been tossing it around for years, but the Northport Promise is what inspired us to sell our house," Brenda Adams said. "Every bit helps."

The Kalamazoo Promise began in 2005 and has since spawned similar efforts in other cities. Started by an anonymous donation, Kalamazoo's program pays a student's tuition and fees for up to four years.

Northport Promise organizers want the program to grow enough so they can do the same, Walker said, but it will take a continued community effort before that can happen.

"That's a pretty lofty goal," Walker said. "What we wanted to do was get it started ... we've been very fortunate to have a lot of people take a lot of interest in this."

The effect of the Promise on the number of families moving to the area has yet to be seen, but Gonzalez, 18, already has seen the benefits firsthand. A 2008 recipient, Gonzalez plans to study automotive work at Northwestern Michigan College next year.

"My sisters and brothers heard about it, and they're thinking about moving here," said Gonzalez, of Lake Leelanau. "It's a great idea to help kids with college."

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Photos



The students receiving the first Northport Promise scholarships are Ryan Blessing, Octavia Buss, Eddie Gonzalez, Sophia Mosher, Rose Petoskey, Betsy Shiner and Basil Stowe. Record-Eagle