**Beach students, educators recognized for putting education to work**

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Gayle Hartigan, one of the three Tallwood High School teachers given Virginia Beach's Human Rights Award, stands in front of some of the students involved in the school's Ambassadors of Change program. (David B. Hollingsworth | The Virginian-Pilot)

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**For the people**The Virginia Beach Human Rights Commission honored these groups or individuals last night during its 14th annual ceremony and banquet at the Virginia Beach Convention Center:

-Earl DeMott, Gayle Hartigan and Lisa Walker; Tallwood High School's Ambassadors of Change Project

-Pastor Todd Davidson, Piney Grove Baptist Church

-Timothy McCarthy, Tidewater Sowers of Justice

-United Jewish Federation of Tidewater & the Simon Family Jewish Community Center's PANIM Teen Program

-Laura Watts, Westminster Canterbury

The commission accepted nominations for the awards program. Recipients were selected by commission members based on nominees' efforts to promote cultural diversity, social awareness and human rights in Virginia Beach.

Learn more about the commission and its work by visiting <http://www.vbgov.com?cid=omc> and entering "Human Rights Commission" in the search window.

By [Rita Frankenberry](http://hamptonroads.com/2007/10/rita-frankenberry)
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Simon Fink has learned plenty about the ongoing conflict in Sudan.

He knows about the African country's mass killings, which have left hundreds of thousands of school-age children orphaned, with some ending up in refugee camps in Kenya or Chad.

But Fink and nine other students weren't stirred to action until they met some of the local "Lost Boys," who were displaced by the conflict, and heard their stories first-hand.

The students - juniors and seniors who are also members of the local PANIM Jewish Civics Initiative Program - were so moved by the Lost Boys' stories they felt something needed to be done to help these refugees.

The result: The teens created Darfest, a rock concert to benefit the people of Darfur, and raised about $10,000.

The PANIM students sent five children, currently living in refugee camps in Africa, to boarding school with the concert proceeds.

"The best part was that we could actually cross borders and affect people half a world away," said Fink, one of the Darfest organizers.

Getting young people out of the refugee camps was the priority, Fink said.

"And giving them an education," he added, "which is infinitely better."

The PANIM students will be one of four recipients recognized Thursday during Virginia Beach 's annual Human Rights Awards program Thursday.

Fay Silverman, volunteer of the city's 11-member volunteer Human Rights Commission, which administers the honors, said the group advocates for and educates Beach residents about their human rights.

Teens joining forces to raise $10,000 was inspirational, Silverman said.

"We forget to thank people for doing good things," she added. "This is to honor them and thank them."

The work of other students and their three Tallwood High teachers will also be recognized during the awards ceremony at the Virginia Beach Convention Center. The educators - Earl Demott, Gayle Hartigan and Lisa Walker - created Ambassadors of Change.

That program teaches Tallwood students about the importance of global citizenship. Through the magic of live video conferences set up in other countries, the world came to the Beach.

The video networking allowed students who are part of the school's Global Studies and World Language Academy to go to a remote part of northern Uganda. They witnessed what life is like at an Internally Displaced Persons Camp in Padibe. Teens on both sides of the earth could "live" talk with each other.

The academy students quickly learned that the Ugandan students, many of whom had been forced to become soldiers and fight in the civil war there, didn't have a school because it had been destroyed during fighting.

In some cases, Hartigan said, these children soldiers were also forced to take part in the destruction of their own villages, to reinforce the feeling that they could never go back home.

"They would usually take part in some act of violence toward the village," Hartigan said. "Some of the things they were forced to do were horrendous."

Now, Hartigan added, school is the only normal thing in these former children soldiers lives.

"It's a way of rehabilitating them into a normal life," she said. "Because they don't know normal anymore."

Realizing this, Tallwood students pledged to raise $10,000 by the end of this school year to help pay for a new Ugandan school's science wing.

Tallwood students have already raised $4,500, and the wing is complete.

The teens raised money through myriad school-wide fundraisers. But, more importantly, the students learned how to advocate for an important cause, Hartigan said.

Later this month, four Tallwood students will travel to Washington, D.C., to learn what the United States' role in Uganda is and how this country influences policy there. They will also learn how to lobby Congress and will meet with their Congressional members.

"One of the most important things they are learning is that one person can make a difference," Hartigan said. "If we do it all together, just a little bit at a time, it can have a really big impact."

Rita Frankenberry,

(757) 222-5102,

rita.frankenberry@pilotonline.com