

Trade of the Week



Mike Turner

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St. Petersburg Times
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May 13, 2009

Teen girls honored as 2009 'Young Women Of Promise'

By Times Wire

Tampa Prep's **Hilary Sedgeman** was born near deaf, and some doctors told her parents they should learn sign language because she would never speak.

Sixteen years later, Sedgeman, who lives in Valrico, spoke to the prestigious Athena Society last week about that prediction, having clearly proved them wrong.

Her mother, Hillsborough Circuit Judge Martha Cook, fought back tears as Sedgeman told the story.

"Booker T. Washington once said success is to be measured not so much by the position one has reached in life, but the obstacles they have overcome in striving for it," Sedgeman explained.

The Athena Society named Sedgeman as one of its 2009 Young Women Of Promise. I make it a point to attend the annual luncheon under the guise of wanting to write about what always proves to be an impressive collection of accomplished young ladies in their junior year.

Of course, that's malarkey. I selfishly attend to learn more about the Women Of Promise because they bless me with inspiration. Like so many young people in our community who quietly make the right choices in the face of adversity, I leave the Athena luncheon each year armed with a renewed sense of hope.

They minimized the supposed problems in my own life. If these talented teens can succeed at such a young age, what excuse do I have? What obstacles do I have?

Consider Sedgeman's story. After years of persistence, Sedgeman not only speaks well and efficiently reads lips, but she also participates in her high school's chorus competitions.

Now, she wants to work as a special education teacher.

"I want to pay it forward by helping kids who are differently-abled," Sedgeman said. "I want to work with kids who, like me, have obstacles they have to overcome. I believe with God's help, they, too, can become successful in life, no matter how big those obstacles are."

Here is some information about three other winners who live in the *South Shore and Brandon Times* area.

Robinson High's **Julia Couto** fluently speaks Portuguese, French and English. The IB student plays violin in Robinson's chamber orchestra and the Patel Conservatory Youth Orchestra. She attributes her success to her Brazilian parents, Angela and Freddie, who came to a new nation not knowing the language or culture but always sacrificing to give her the best.



"My mother always says, 'Julia, you will grow up and do everything I was not able to do,' " said Couto, who lives in Valrico.

Spoto High's **Jessica Conkey** fears public speaking. Or at least she used to. Despite that fear, Conkey accepted the challenge of the "It Oughta Be A Law" program. The exercise gives students a chance to go to Tallahassee and lobby for a law that they've crafted. The once-shy Conkey addressed legislators in a public forum.

"We had to make our voices heard among hundreds of people," Conkey explained. "To the outside world, we were just teenagers, but we were treated like any other adult lobbyist. It's an experience that changed my life."

An honor student, Conkey excels at writing and will serve as editor-in-chief of the school paper next year. She ultimately would like to become a psychologist.

Durant's **Somer Harvey** longs to be a reconstructive plastic surgeon, helping children with deformities. The honor student and Future Farmer of America president also raised a prize-winning swine for the Florida State Fair.

Harvey, however, is most proud of her work with the Girl Scouts. She will receive the silver award this year.

"It's not that it was for self-gain, but I was able to touch many younger girls' lives," Harvey said. "We were able to interact with each other, share values and help one another discover who we were."

Harvey says she has every intention of earning the Girl Scouts' highest designation, the gold award. She also wants to create a downtown Plant City walking tour to help stimulate the economy of her hometown.

Other winners: Gaither's **Laura Ackart**, Academy of the Holy Names' **Mallory Hogan**, Hillsborough's **Jennifer Le**, King's **Kelsey Nestor**, Blake's **Mariana Stavig**, Freedom's **Jerisa Upton** and Berkeley Prep's **Shantaviae Wynn**.

St. Petersburg Times



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