

# Rocky Mountain Rotary Youth Leadership Awards United Way Proposal

## 1) Program Plan

### Proposal Alignment:

Rocky Mountain Rotary Youth Leadership Awards (RMRYLA) hosts two week-long leadership conferences for middle school students (YRYLA), and one for high school students (RYLA). The mission of RMRYLA is to provide positive youth development by educating and empowering participants, ultimately improving academic performance, increasing graduation rates from high school, and encouraging readiness for entering the workforce or to transitioning to college or advanced training. The mission of RMRYLA fits the positive youth development strategy of the United Way RFP for Impact Investment. In addition to the transformative and life changing leadership conferences, RMRYLA adult and peer mentors connect conferees to life-long support networks, and inspire them to be civically engaged, active members of their communities. Activities and speakers at RYLA and YRYLA promote self-discovery, healthy relationship development with peers and adults, and the Rotary International motto “Service Above Self. Leaders model and teach leadership skills such as:

- Communication
- Creative problem solving
- Extravagant kindness
- Resiliency
- Ethical decision making through the Rotary International 4-way test

Upon follow-up and evaluation of programming RMRYLA conferees are more likely to engage in service to their communities or schools. Specifically, many RMRYLA graduates join or begin community service clubs. One of the school-based clubs is called Interact, a Rotary sponsored organization for youth 12-18. Engaged, motivated youth, like those who complete RYLA or YRYLA are more likely to graduate high school and succeed in post-secondary pursuits.

### Target Population and Area Served:

The RYLA conference serves high school students between the ages of 15 and 18, and YRYLA serves students in 8<sup>th</sup> grade between the ages of 11 and 13. The RMRYLA programs target these crucial developmental stages, providing strategies and tools for success during these critical periods of the conferee’s lives. Students who attend the RYLA and YRYLA conferences come from Rotary districts 5450 and 5440 which encompass the northern front range of Colorado, all of Wyoming, Western Nebraska and Eastern Idaho. Within these districts there are 103 Rotary Clubs that sponsor students in their region to attend the RYLA and YRYLA conferences. Students from the two districts have vastly different racial, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds and are brought together to create communities in spite of their differences.

This past year RYLA served 240 conferees in one week and YRYLA served 240 total between two weeks. For the summer of 2012, the conferences had applicants from 138 different high schools, 180 middle schools, and 193 different zip codes. Of those, RMRYLA was able to accommodate students from 99 different Rotary Clubs, 138 high schools and 122 middle schools across 155 different zip codes, which are listed below. Of the students accepted to the program, 5% are categorized as high-risk youth who are in danger of dropping out of high school. RMRYLA is aiming to increase the number of high-risk participants to 10% of the participant total by 2014 through outreach, teacher recruitment and retention in the program.

### Zip Codes Served:

80224	80031	80723	80758	82633	80501	82520	69358	69341	80534	80422
80403	80121	80231	80113	80005	80232	80129	80011	80242	80543	80026
80534	80439	80631	80233	80123	80016	80124	80634	80030	80014	80733
80498	82009	82003	80525	80228	80015	80027	80013	80750	80234	80111
80443	80204	80134	80109	80104	80236	80126	80446	80537	80246	80226
80022	80210	80457	80751	80206	80602	80003	82801	80238	80116	
80249	80470	80219	82072	82604	80435	82718	80211	80620	80487	
69361	80467	80239	69156	80020	80521	82070	82930	82836	80516	

# Rocky Mountain Rotary Youth Leadership Awards United Way Proposal

80130	80503	80127	80538	80303	80305	81625	80610	82609	82223	
80524	80018	82007	80004	80229	80122	80401	80546	80205	80465	
80737	80615	80433	80526	83101	80436	80222	80504	80221	80477	
82001	80442	82443	80440	80601	80439	80203	80516	80112	80110	
80021	82240	80304	80108	80010	80439	80138	80482	80225	80524	
80451	80452	82059	80759	80550	80220	80120	80112	80207	80135	
80010	82414	80640	80731	80528	82601	80301	80701	80531	80497	

## Statement of Need:

According to the Education Week Graduation Rate Map, the average percent of students graduating high school in the four states served by RMRYLA is 74.75%<sup>1</sup>. In the case of the high-risk students RMRYLA currently serves (about 5% of total participation), the estimated graduation rate is 55%. RMRYLA is dedicated to having over 75% of the high-risk students that attend either the RYLA or YRYLA graduate from high school. RMRYLA conferences provide a unique approach to teaching resiliency, encouraging strong, healthy adult relationships, teaching life skills and modeling civic engagement, supporting the efforts of community and school based programs to increase graduation rates.

A percentage of the youth served by RMRYLA report a sense of hopelessness when it comes to overcoming obstacles prior to attending the conferences. According to the Alliance for Excellent Education, this sense of hopelessness is one of the factors that decrease the likelihood of graduating from high school. In addition to the conference activities which teach self-understanding and resiliency, RMRYLA conferees are connected and mentored by community leaders and successful business people from Rotary and strong peer leaders in order to understand what it takes to overcome obstacles, stay focused and move forward with their goals.

For many conferees, the close relationship formed with their Senior Rotarian Counselor (SRC) represents the first trusting relationship they have had with a non-related adult. According to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, “supportive relationships between students and adults”<sup>2</sup> is one of the three keys to success in high school. In “The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts”, only 41% of high school dropouts indicated they had a trusting adult relationship in school<sup>3</sup>. By encouraging healthy relationships between civically-engaged, successful adults and conferees RMRYLA fosters success.

The SRCs and the RMRYLA program provide connections to service and civic engagement opportunities locally and globally through Rotary and their own personal experiences. According to Davila and Mora in their 2007 study on civic engagement and high school progress, students who were civically engaged expressed significantly higher rates of graduation, increased academic achievement, and had 22% higher college graduation rates than non-engaged students<sup>4</sup>. By demonstrating “Service Above Self” (Rotary International’s motto) and encouraging students to participate in school service clubs addresses an overlooked strategy to increase high school graduation rates.

The YRYLA conference was formed because RMRYLA realized that a high school conference can be too late to make a difference in graduation rates. Research from the National High School Center has shown that in order “to be most effective in preventing dropout, school systems should focus dropout prevention efforts

<sup>1</sup> Ed Week Maps. 2009. Education Week. 10/10/12. <http://www.edweek.org/apps/gmap>.

<sup>2</sup> Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. “Fact Sheet: High Quality High Schools”. The Three R’s Solution. [http://www.gatesfoundation.org/united-states/Documents/Fact\\_Sheet\\_High\\_Quality\\_Schools.pdf](http://www.gatesfoundation.org/united-states/Documents/Fact_Sheet_High_Quality_Schools.pdf). 10/10/12.

<sup>3</sup> Bradgeland, J., DiJulio Jr., J., & Burke Morison, K. “The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts” March 2006. A report by Civic Enterprises in association with Peter De. Hart Research Associates for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. <http://www.ignitelearning.com/pdf/TheSilentEpidemic3-06FINAL.pdf>. 10/10/12.

<sup>4</sup> Davila, A., & Mora, M. “Civic Engagement and High School Academic Progress: An Analysis Using NELS Data” January 2007. <http://www.civicyouth.org/circle-working-paper-52-civic-engagement-and-high-school-academic-progress-an-analysis-using-nels-data/>. 10/10/12.

# Rocky Mountain Rotary Youth Leadership Awards United Way Proposal

in the beginning of the middle grades. Most future dropouts may be identified as early as sixth grade.”<sup>55</sup> Employing the same strategies as RYLA, providing tools for self-understanding, fostering healthy relationships, and demonstrating “Service Above Self” in a way more suited to the target age group, RMRYLA is able to better affect graduation rates.

Currently, the RYLA programs are able to provide direct programming for a few hundred of the thousands of young adults within the target population. In 2012 RMRYLA received 831 applications for 480 available slots at the conferences (up from 770 applications in 2011). By increasing the number of students served and allowing multiple attendees from each school because of increased resources from this grant, RMRYLA will be able to serve higher numbers of high-risk students and have a drastic effect on engagement, and ultimately, graduation rates.

## **Program Focus:**

The RMRYLA conferences utilize skills-based activities to instill self-understanding, positive relationship skills, and motivation to engage in school and community. Students from two Rotary districts with different racial, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds are brought together for six intense days of challenging team building exercises, inspirational speakers and mentors, and leadership learning. Teams of 10-12 conferees from different backgrounds experience the challenging week together, underscoring the value of diversity and compassion. Team members gain understanding of self and others, healthy relationships with peers and adults, and are motivated to be civically engaged in their communities.

Activities at the conference include team building challenges, small group bonding, personality profiling, silly sports tournaments, and group discussions on difficult problems faced by today’s youth. Specific activities include; Eggspress - designing a capsule to protect an egg dropped off a ladder, True Colors – a personality profiling system based on Myers-Briggs, My Proudest Achievements – conferees share their proudest life achievements and receives positive feedback from the team, and a service project – creating blankets or toys or other projects to assist organizations like the Children’s Hospital and the Dumb Friends League. Each activity focuses on at least one of these ten principals of success: character development, life-affirming and success strategies, public service, delayed gratification, intentionality, trust, peer leadership, communication, creative problem solving, and extravagant kindness. Each activity is debriefed, analyzing the issues that arose, the successes, how each individual contributed to the activity, and how to approach other challenges.

Conferees form extremely close relationships with their team and counselors, often sharing life experiences for the first time. Between their team members and counselors, each conferee leaves with at least 12 close, supportive relationships. These relationships create positive impact regarding their path to graduation and post-secondary success.

RMRYLA conferences also feature inspirational speakers who have accomplished everything from starting the largest anti-gang initiative in Denver to spending five years walking around the world. The speakers provide unique ways to identify and accomplish dreams, and demonstrate motivation and dedication to the conferees. Towards the end of the week, several speakers focus on “How to Live the RYLA Life” and other Rotary opportunities for youth (including Interact high school clubs), providing the conferees with successful strategies to continue utilizing the discoveries made during RYLA and YRYLA, and spread these values among their friends and families.

The special combination of activities and speakers unique to RMRYLA delivers a combination of self-understanding, healthy relationship skills, and civic engagement to conferees. Every moment of the conferences is designed to accomplish the objectives of:

- 1) Increasing self- discovery and understanding.

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<sup>5</sup> Kennelly, L., & Monrad, M. “Approaches to Dropout Prevention: Heeding Early Warning Signs With Appropriate Interventions” October 2007. National High School Center. [http://www.betterhighschools.org/docs/nhsc\\_approachestodropoutprevention.pdf](http://www.betterhighschools.org/docs/nhsc_approachestodropoutprevention.pdf). 10/3/12.

# Rocky Mountain Rotary Youth Leadership Awards United Way Proposal

- 2) Increasing appreciation and healthy relationship development.
- 3) Increase the desire and capacity of the student to become civically engaged.
- 4) Increase the ability of the student for ethical and intentional decision making based on the Rotary 4-Way Test (Is it the truth?/ Is it fair to all concerned?/ Will it build goodwill and better friendships?/ Will it be beneficial to all concerned?).
- 5) Increasing membership in school based clubs such as Interact (Rotary sponsored).
- 6) Increase academic achievement and graduation rates of those students who attend RMRYLA.
- 7) Increase the number of students who possess the skills necessary to transition into college or the workplace.
- 8) Mix high-risk and non high-risk students in a safe environment so they may learn from each other and each is better equipped to succeed.

These outcomes are accomplished by not only the intensive training at the RMRYLA conferences but also by long term follow-up, mentoring, networking, newly developed relationships and connections.

## **Rationale for Approach:**

Twenty six years ago, the RYLA conference was developed by a group of Rotarians to instill leadership, citizenship, and ethical decision-making in high school students, utilizing models of other successful RYLA programs from across the U.S. Rotarians in districts 5450 and 5440 recognized that many young adults lacked these qualities, and they made a commitment to developing future leaders through one-week intensive conferences for young adults. Since RYLA and YRYLA's inceptions, RMRYLA has consistently evaluated and improved programming through focus groups, post-conference evaluations, teacher and parent testimonials, and follow up.

RMRYLA is unique because the conferences engage students from extremely diverse backgrounds in an extracurricular, entirely community based, volunteer-led program on leadership. Additionally, conference staff and the RMRYLA board continually solicit input from high school students, middle school students, counselors, teachers, administrators, parents, psychologists, and experts in leadership training and life strategies and implement identified strategies and activities in the programs of the conferences. RMRYLA participants have consistently indicated that the conference is a transformative experience that encourages and enables their continued achievement and success.

YRYLA was formed 11 years ago by inspired Rotarians and middle school teachers. YRYLA has employed self-assessment testing since the beginning, and on a 10 point scale YRYLA conferees increase an average of 2.5 points per question in all areas, including indicators such as; confidence in self, comfort relating to peers and adults, motivation to succeed in school, and ability to ask for help when needed.

Testimonials given by conference participants strongly demonstrate the impact of the conferences in regard to the positive trajectory of their lives after getting involved with the program. In the last year, RMRYLA created a more complete evaluation process compiling evidence of success. RMRYLA has utilized interviews, evaluations, surveys, and follow up testimonials, and is looking to use teacher interviews and academic achievement and graduation rate monitoring in the future.

RMRYLA is a program based on a blend of best practice in leadership development of youth and evaluation results.

# Rocky Mountain Rotary Youth Leadership Awards United Way Proposal

## 2) Collaborative/Cooperative Relationships

Rocky Mountain Rotary Youth Leadership Awards (RMRYLA) has strong relationships with 86% of the Rotary Clubs within the Rotary districts of 5450 and 5440. 103 of the 119 Rotary Clubs in the two districts participate in the Rocky Mountain RYLA programs, making RMRYLA the most widely supported project in both districts. Most Rotary clubs participate in selecting and sponsoring students (currently priced at \$450 each) from their region to attend the RMRYLA conferences. By allowing each Rotary club to select their conferees, RMRYLA is able to ensure that the limited spaces at the conference are given to those who will most benefit from the program. This process allows RMRYLA volunteers to focus on planning RYLA and YRYLA each year. Additionally, the sponsoring Rotary clubs act as support systems for the participants once they return, and offer opportunities for participants to engage in their home communities through service and/or through the local Interact (school based, Rotary sponsored) Club. By sending conferees, Rotary Clubs are investing in leadership development for the youth in their communities, and creating future leaders who are civically engaged and active.

Rotary Clubs also provide volunteer Senior Rotarian Counselors (SRC) to mentor the teams at the conferences. This past year, 54 Rotarians from 32 Rotary Clubs were involved with RMRYLA. The SRCs offer their experiences and wisdom to conferees, helping them gain new leadership skills. The relationships built between SRCs and the RMRYLA participants are strong, meaningful connections that continue long after RYLA is over. Many SRCs have said “I was a member of Rotary before I came to RYLA, now I have been transformed into a Rotarian, truly understanding ‘Service Above Self’”.

Rocky Mountain RYLA is connected to approximately 50 Interact clubs throughout the two Rotary districts. Interact is an international community service organization that is part of the Rotary family and was designed to help young adults build leadership skills and personal integrity, promote Service Above Self, and advance international understanding and goodwill. Each Interact club is sponsored by a Rotary Club, and many youth who attend RYLA or YRYLA join or start Interact clubs in their schools. There are several examples of RYLA attendees starting Interact Clubs, in subsequent years Interact members have attended RYLA, and as a result of the continued partnership, student engagement has increased across the entire population of the school. For example, Summit High School sent one conferee to RYLA in 2008; upon her return she began an Interact Club that now has over 200 members, and the Summit Rotary Club sends at least 12 conferees to RYLA each year. Through these relationships RMRYLA cast a wider support network for conferees and they have the chance to bring the lessons they learned at RYLA and YRYLA home to change and improve their communities.

RMRYLA has worked with organizations such as Habitat for Humanity, Dumb Friends League, and The Children’s Hospital providing supplies and manpower through the RMRYLA conferees. In addition, RMRYLA is exploring collaborations with other youth development organizations to improve the training for conference leaders. To expand and improve collaborations in the community, RMRYLA needs additional staff to focus on developing collaborative community relationships with youth serving organizations.

# Rocky Mountain Rotary Youth Leadership Awards United Way Proposal

## 3) Evaluation

For the last 10 years there have been program evaluations (completed throughout the week or on the last day) for all the activities and speakers at RMRYLA conferences. These evaluations, along with data from focus groups, have been the primary tools used to monitor, assess, evaluate, and improve the conferences for the following year. In an effort to analyze the effectiveness of RMRYLA as related to the stated outcomes, each RYLA and YRYLA participant was also asked to complete a pre-conference and post-conference self assessment. The assessment asked participants to rate themselves on a scale of one to ten on the following:

Ability to look for the positive	Ability to step outside of their comfort zone
Importance of giving encouragement to others	Ability to handle setbacks
Importance of making others feel important	Ability to ask for help
Ability to express their true feelings	Ability to lead their peers
Level of comfort working in a team	Interest in engaging in service
Ability to identify their strengths and weaknesses	Interest in ongoing leadership development

Both RYLA and YRYLA demonstrated an average increase of 12% across all twelve categories from the pre-test to the post-test, with the highest increases being in the categories of the ability to ask for help, and the ability to step outside of their comfort zone.

The post-conference assessment also asked participants to detail what they learned, answers included “I learned that it’s important to be myself always”, “I learned that I can do anything as long as I believe in myself”, and “I learned to accept failure and not get frustrated”. Additionally, participants of the RYLA conference were asked “What are your future plans for providing community service to your community and your world?” The answers reflected a desire to become involved in their communities and their schools, often through Interact clubs. Answers included: “I plan on joining my school's Interact Club, NHS and maybe start a fundraiser. I plan on putting others before myself”, “I will help my school to have their own RYLA experience. I want everyone to feel as safe as I did at RYLA”, “I am definitely going to get involved in more community service, reach out to others, ask for help if I need it, and try to be the leader I am everyday”.

One of the goals of RMRYLA is to increase the number of high risk minority students that will be recruited for the RYLA and YRYLA conferences and Interact Clubs. These high risk, high potential young people will have new opportunities that may transform the trajectory of their lives. The resources from this grant will assist in this effort. Evaluation of this goal will be accomplished by monitoring the numbers of educators and Rotarians recommending students who have many obstacles to overcome, are at risk of dropping out of school, yet have a spark of perseverance and promise, and by increasing attendance of these type of students at RYLA and YRYLA.

### Quality Improvement:

The RMRYLA conference planning teams analyze program evaluations in order to gain a better understanding of which activities and speakers were most impactful at the conferences. By identifying which activities were most influential, RMRYLA is able to identify effective activities and speakers. Each year the conference planning teams improve the programs based on the participant results as well as counselor feedback acquired through focus groups. RMRYLA is dedicated to continually improving the RMRYLA experience.

Beginning in the mid 2000’s the RYLA and YRYLA conferences started experiencing a period of extreme growth, and quickly realized RMRYLA would have to grow to support the increasing

# Rocky Mountain Rotary Youth Leadership Awards United Way Proposal

demand. In 2010 the RMRYLA board went through a visioning process aimed at creating goals for the year 2015. The results of the program evaluations led the visioning process, and resulted in a restructuring of the desired conference outcomes:

Understanding of self and others	Healthy relationships development with peers and adults
Civic engagement locally and internationally	Positive youth development and leadership skills
Service Above Self	Overcoming obstacles

The RMRYLA board and conference staff are dedicated to accomplishing these outcomes in specific, measurable, timely ways, and this vision has given RMRYLA a framework around which to grow.

In additional, in 2011 based on conferee program evaluations, the RMRYLA board became aware of inconsistencies in conference programming year to year that detracted from the success of the conferences. In response, the RMRYLA board voted to install a Program Committee and a Governance Committee. Both of these groups ensure the success of the conference planning teams by providing oversight, imparting historical knowledge, and instituting proper procedures before and during the conferences.

### **Evaluation growth:**

With the addition of a full-time staff person (due to this grant), RMRYLA will be able to increase and improve the current capacity for evaluation. Currently, all staff and board members use their time planning the conferences, and have little time to focus on accurate evaluation methods. RMRYLA is specifically interested in measuring the success of RMRYLA's outcomes in the alumni population, what effect do the conferences have on participants 5-10 years down the road? A staff person partially dedicated to evaluation would enable RMRYLA to acquire more accurate and more long-term results from its programs.

An important piece of RMRYLA's goals is the dedication to increasing the number of high- risk students that will be nominated by their teachers and will attend the transformative camp and leadership development week. Along with the RMRYLA board, Program Committee and Governance Committee, a staff person would be able to improve outreach to the target communities, and provide training for the RMRYLA Representatives who select conferees. The staff person will also monitor, evaluate, provide oversight and encouragement to educators and students to increase programming quality, monitoring, follow-up and retention of students in leadership and character development. This would accomplish the goal of increasing academic achievement and decrease dropout rates of high-risk students who attend RYLA and YRYLA.