

# Exchange Club student honorees are aces

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HP Staff Writer

A former high school drop-out on her way to becoming a nurse. A student who overcame a devastating brain tumor. A student videographer who created an inspiring message about fighting cancer.

These three students were honored Tuesday by the Exchange Club of Southwest Michigan.

This year's A.C.E. (Accepting the Challenge of Excellence) award winners were Nicole Yerington of Lakeshore High School, who left and then returned to school, all the while working to support herself and her family; and Kevin Jones of St. Joseph High School, who was diagnosed with a brain tumor as a freshman but maintained a high grade point average and kept up numerous school activities through his treatment and recovery. He was declared cancer-free in August 2014.

Erica Heathcote, also of

St. Joseph High School, was named Youth of the Year for her "Team Up Against Cancer" video, her school activities and high academic standing.

The A.C.E. awards are presented nationally to "students who make it against all odds," said Exchange Club member Andy Hannich. "Some of us have the wind against us. But it's not where you start, but where you end up that counts."

The awards came with \$250 scholarships and gift bags from United Federal Credit Union.

## Rising above

Lakeshore guidance counselor Melinda Grashius introduced Nicole, daughter of Gary and Norma Yerington, as one of the hardest-working students she has helped over her 30-year career.

Nicole shared that her parents' divorce was a tough experience for her, and that her mother struggled to make ends meet,

prompting the young woman to get a job as a waitress.

"It only took me a year to realize that I could not survive on \$2.23 an hour," she said, convincing her to return to complete her education. She is employed at Dunkin Donuts, rising at 4 a.m. every morning, working until 10 and then attending classes until 2 p.m.

Her plans include attending college and obtaining a nursing degree and working in an intensive care unit because of her desire to "take care of people who can't take care of themselves."

Headaches and double vision led Kevin Jones to see a doctor during the second semester of his freshman year. He suspected that a concussion from playing football might have caused the pressure behind his left eye. But tests found a large tumor and he was diagnosed with germinoma brain cancer.

The good news, doctors at the University of Chicago told Kevin and his parents, Chris and Christine



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**Exchange Club student award winners, from left, Erica Heathcote and Kevin Jones, of St. Joseph High School, and Nicole Yerington, of Lakeshore High School, were honored Tuesday. Heathcote was named Youth of the Year and Jones and Yerington received A.C.E. awards given to students who overcome difficult obstacles.**

Jones, was that the illness had a 90 percent cure rate. It still required two surgeries, four chemotherapy treatments and four weeks of radiation treatment.

During his recovery, St. Joseph High guidance counselor Tracy Wagner, who nominated Kevin for the award, "was like a sec-

ond mother," said Chris Jones. She arranged home schooling and was available day and night.

During his freshman year, Kevin missed 38 days of school and still maintained a 3.1 grade point average. During his sophomore year he missed 66 days as his immune sys-

tem struggled, and he kept up a B average. He had to give up football but kept working out with the team, earning two varsity letters. He was manager for the basketball team and was part of the award-winning robotics team while

See EXCHANGE, page A4

## EXCHANGE

From page A3

working at a local restaurant.

Kevin plans to attend Lake Michigan College and then transfer to Davenport University and work in cyber security.

### Don't stop

Erica Heathcote, whose passions are media, photography and the arts, was given the assignment of creating a "Team Up Against Cancer" video by St. Joseph Superintendent Ann Cardon. In the video, teachers from every school in the district would dance to Fleetwood Mac's "Don't Stop Thinking About Tomorrow" in tie-dyed Team Up Against Cancer T-shirts.

She approached the project with some trepidation. But as the filming went on she realized that the superintendent wanted "a video full of smiling faces. Full of familiar, happy people. Full of joy." Many of those who participated had family members or friends who had been affected by cancer, or were survivors themselves, Erica learned.

She continued to be nervous up to the time the video was shown to students, until she heard their laughter and saw their smiles at the finished product. She said she discovered that her passion could be used as inspiration for others. The three-minute video can be viewed on the St. Joseph Public Schools Facebook page.

Erica, daughter of Robert and Kathryn Heathcote, is a member of the National Honor Society and maintained a 3.99 grade point average. She will be attending the College for Creative Studies in Detroit.

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