



News

Young, gifted and honoured Teens among Canada's best

By Barb McKay
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Two local students have been named among the top 20 most innovative young minds in the country.

Natalie Raso is only 17, but the young Hamilton scientist could be well on her way to discovering a cure for cancer.

Kayla Cornale, 16, of Burlington, invented a teaching system that helps children with autism learn to read and spell through music.

The girls were recently honoured with a group of young Canadian entrepreneurs, scientists, inventors and social activists in Youth In Motion's 2006 Top 20 Under 20 competition.

The award is presented to people under 20 who have demonstrated leadership, achievement and innovation.

Raso, a St. Thomas More Catholic Secondary School student, was chosen because of her research into the use of a mutant herpes simplex virus to selectively kill cancer cells.

"When I was told I was a finalist, I thought it was the coolest thing," she said.

"When I found out I won, I was so excited ... It's such an amazing program and Youth In Motion is such an amazing organization."



Ted Brellisford, the Hamilton Spectator

Natalie Raso, with her awards, took part in a cancer breakthrough.

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Raso began working with McMaster University researcher Dr. Karen Mossman in October 2004 and, after thousands of hours of research, discovered that the mutant virus could kill cancerous cells without affecting healthy ones.

Her research won her top honours at the 2005 Canada-wide Science Fair and gold and platinum medals at the 2005 Bay Area Science and Engineering Fair.

Raso is modest about her accomplishment.

"It's all pieces of a puzzle and I put one piece in," she said.

"The research Dr. Mossman is doing is so valuable and I'm so happy to have been a part of it. It will change the future of cancer treatment."

Achievement runs in the Raso family.

Her father, Joe Raso, is the McMaster University basketball head coach who led the team to the Canadian championships 12 out of 14 years.

Raso's 13-year-old sister, Patricia, won a gold medal at this year's Bay Area Science and Engineering Fair.

Kayla Cornale's Sounds Into Symbols teaching system -- it applies musical notes to letters of the alphabet -- has earned her heaps of recognition.

She developed the system to help teach her young autistic cousin to read.

She is now working with the Halton Catholic District School Board to teach the system to autistic children at the elementary and secondary school levels next school year.

"I've seen progress with my cousin and that's great," she said. "But I'd like to see this get to other children. There are so many children in need so it's very gratifying to see it put to use."

Cornale and Raso attended the Top 20 Under 20 awards ceremony last month in Toronto where they met the other Top 20 winners and attended a four-day leadership summit.

"The week I spent there was the most empowering week of my life," Raso said.

"I met 19 other amazing kids. It was an incredible experience."

Raso said the summit, featuring lectures from business and community leaders, gave her a new interest in environmental and social issues.

When she follows her ambition to become a doctor, Raso hopes to combine her love of medicine with her newfound interest in social justice issues.

Raso and Cornale weren't the only local achievers in the Top 20 Under 20 competition. Two other Hamiltonians were selected as finalists.

Jessica Matson, 18, of Hamilton, and Kristin Stawiarski, 17, of Ancaster, were among 22 national finalists. Matson helped form a non-profit group called Project Cool, which raised more than \$10,000 for Autism Treatment Services of Canada.

Matson and a friend are reality TV fanatics and decided that if they were going to raise funds for children's charities, their plan would have to include reality TV stars.




In 2003, the first year of the campaign, the girls raised enough money to fly 20 reality TV stars into the province so fans could make a donation to meet their favourite stars.

Stawiarski initiated the Kids Helping Kids campaign to raise funds to help sponsor deserving children from her community to take in a production of The Nutcracker. The campaign raised \$7,500.

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