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Youth in Governance program molds Kenosha County's future leaders

KENOSHA – Michael Hertel didn't know how things would go when he first took his seat alongside County Board supervisors as a member of Kenosha County Youth in Governance program.

He hoped to make a difference for his community, but he wasn't sure if the adults around him would listen. Two years later, Hertel graduated from the program, highly satisfied with his experience.

"If you put a lot into it, you're going to get a lot out of it," Hertel said. "That's what happened to me."

Now in its 11th year, Kenosha County Youth in Governance swore in its newest class of 14 local high school students earlier this summer.

Participants serve as advisory members of the County Board's six standing committees, plus the Kenosha Joint Services Board. They attend meetings and have the opportunity to contribute to discussions just the same as the elected supervisors who make up the committees. The students are paired with a mentor member of each committee.

"Youth in Governance does an outstanding job of getting some of our community's best and brightest teens involved in government at a young age," said County Executive Jim Kreuser. "These are our future leaders."

Members are nominated, often by teachers, before undergoing an in-depth interview process. For the 2017 program year, there were 260 nominees, 20 of whom were interviewed by current and past YIG participants and members of the County Board's Planning, Development and Extension Education Committee.

"The youths we get that apply for Youth in Governance, they're always so amazing," said Supervisor Erin Decker, chairwoman of the Planning, Development and Extension Education

Committee. "They're all bright and active and just great. It's always great to see a bunch of people who you know that, in the future, they're going to do well."

In order to be considered for YIG participation, applicants must be Kenosha County residents in 10th or 11th grade with a grade-point average of 2.5 or greater. Participants are required to attend the monthly meetings of their assigned committee, plus at least one full County Board meeting during their one-year term. They are also required to participate in a bus tour – a one-day crash course in all of the functions of county government – at the start of the term.

Terms run from May to May. High school juniors completing their first term have the opportunity to apply to return for a second year.

Morgan Kolimaga recently took that path. An incoming senior at LakeView Technology Academy, she served as a YIG representative on the Joint Services Board during the 2016-'17 term, and will spend the 2017-'18 term on the Judiciary and Law Committee.

"I wanted the opportunity to learn about county government and what it takes to run it," Kolimaga said. "I have been interested in a career in forensic science, and it is important to understand how county government and law enforcement professionals work together to protect citizens."

As for how she expects YIG to benefit her in the future, Kolimaga pointed to her greatly expanded knowledge of how county government works.

"It inspires me to want to be active as an adult in my own county government," Kolimaga said. "Also, the committee members have encouraged me to participate in the monthly meetings, which has helped build my confidence in speaking publicly and improved my capabilities as a future leader."

Jamal Hanson, a Tremper High school student, is new to the program this year. He said he joined because he wanted to get a closer look into government – and "to learn what being a leader really means."

"Being a leader is caring, is helping, is questioning, and is learning along the way," Hanson said. "If I can take these lessons that Youth in Governance is instilling in me into real life, I will have truly become a great leader and successful person."

County Board Chairwoman Kim Breunig has been a champion of Youth in Governance since it began. What was then an experiment for Kenosha County has become a model for governments elsewhere in Wisconsin that have launched similar programs.

"I don't think there's ever been a youth who came out of there saying 'that was a waste of my time,'" Breunig said. "Whether they talk in the committee meetings or not, I think they always learn something."

"I love this program," Breunig added. "I think it was one of the best things that Kenosha County ever did."

Hertel, who graduated this past spring from Indian Trail High School and Academy and is now headed to the University of Wisconsin-Parkside, said his YIG experience exceeded his expectations.

"I think that this program is a very excellent program that the county has, and I know other counties use it as a model," Hertel said. "It's truly an asset to the community to have, and the people who run it are just excellent people."

For more information about Kenosha County Youth in Governance, please visit http://kenosha.uwex.edu/youth-development/youth-in-governance/.

The 2017-'18 Youth in Governance class includes:
- Jeremy Jin, Finance and Administration Committee
- Emma Heller-Cavener, Finance and Administration Committee
- Megan Setter, Human Services Committee
- Na'Kia Hughes, Human Services Committee
- Jamal Hanson, Joint Services Board
- Janaki Rawal, Joint Services Board
- Morgan Kolimaga, Judiciary and Law Committee
- Anna Delisi, Judiciary and Law Committee
- Isabella Ricker, Legislative Committee
- Aubriana Maedke, Legislative Committee
- Jonathan Filiatreault, Planning, Development and Extension Education Committee
- Julia Arturi, Planning, Development and Extension Education Committee
- Alexander Dawson, Public Works and Facilities Committee
- Aiden Moore, Public Works and Facilities Committee

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