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Substantial award aids accomplished social entrepreneur

GOSHEN, Ind. – A pony-powered environmental lawn-mowing service established Kathryn Birky as a socially conscious entrepreneur when she was only 12. And this year, the business plan for the service helped the Goshen College sophomore win a \$24,000 young entrepreneur scholarship.

The award, given annually by the National Association for the Self-Employed (NASE), is a national prize for a student who shows interest and promise in entrepreneurship.

Birky, a communication major from Glenn, Mich., demonstrated both aptitudes when she and her brother began researching environmentally friendly ways to mow the lawn six years ago. They decided to try a horse-powered reel mower, a type of non-motorized mower normally sold to the Amish.

“We enthusiastically purchased a pony named Clementine, built a barn and took driving lessons,” Birky wrote in the essay describing her business plan for the scholarship competition. After advertising the service with flyers explaining the advantages to mow without using gasoline, Birky said, “We accepted as many lawns as Clementine could handle.” They have kept their business going every summer since.



Kathryn Birky and her horse-powered reel mower

Entrepreneurship is often thought of as a way to be self-sufficient, but for Birky, the value goes far beyond that. She is personally more interested in social entrepreneurship, which is what activists do to try to create social change. “I think social entrepreneurs aren’t doing it for the money or for their local community; they’re doing it for their society in the bigger picture.”

Her success at raising social awareness while launching a business became apparent in its first year and continued. “When I began mowing lawns with a pony, I was simply attempting to respect the earth with my decisions. Since then, I have seen it grow in ways I never imagined,” she wrote in her essay for the scholarship.

Soon their small but unique business operation was receiving national attention with stories in “The Detroit Free Press” and “The Boston Globe.” Then a Canadian author mentioned the business in her book and Birky and her brother were named by the governor of Michigan. For Birky, it was especially rewarding that the attention influenced others to seek alternatives to gas-powered mowers.

“After our first summer, we were selected to represent the U.S. at the United Nations International Children’s Environmental Conference on the Environment,” Birky said. “This led to leadership opportunities at other U.N. conferences and meetings with corporate and political leaders to speak of our concerns for the environment.”

Duane Stoltzfus, professor of communication, has observed Birky and her work in the classroom. “Fortunately, those around her, Kathryn is determined to use all the daylight hours she can to do good in the world,” he said.

Birky continues to have high aspirations. Though she doesn’t plan to continue the mowing business, her values haven’t shifted. She hopes to be an independent environmental writer, believing: “If I can convince individuals to make their everyday decisions with this awareness in mind, their united actions will create a greener world and a brighter future.”

“An entrepreneur is a visionary: they see opportunities for improvement in a society that other people haven’t yet,” she said.

The lawn-mowing business is a good example. Stoltzfus said, “Not only was it a savvy marketing technique, but she made a heartfelt statement about opportunities for non-polluting lawn care. With a little imagination, she sees that saying, each person can make a difference in caring for the earth.”

“I am already an entrepreneur,” Birky wrote in her winning essay. “At this stage I only need to continue to be successful.”

She is already on her way to achieving this, having won the scholarship.

Anyone across the nation who is a child of a NASE member can apply for the award. NASE, an organization that provides resources, benefits and support to help self-employed people succeed, has approximately 250,000 members.

Both of Birky's parents are members of the organization as clinical social workers with private practices. Wait them influenced her interests and goals. "Besides clearly being an inspiration, I definitely have been able to having self-employed parents," Birky said. "They had more flexibility for family time, and could balance the p and now I really think that's the best way to have a family."

Birky's current entrepreneurial endeavor holds potential for her continued success. She is working with a pul her first book, called "Friendship with Horses," information for teens about training horses.

Editors: For more information about this release, to arrange an interview or request a photo, contac College News Bureau Director Jodi H. Beyeler at (574) 535-7572 or jodihb@goshen.edu.

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