

Mackenzie Smith, 15, of Borden and Olivia Keith 11, of Fishers were recently named Indiana's top two youth volunteers of 2015 by The Prudential Spirit of Community Awards, a nationwide program honoring young people for outstanding acts of volunteerism.

Mackenzie was nominated by William W. Borden Jr.-Sr. High School in Borden and Olivia was nominated by Sand Creek Intermediate School in Fishers.

The Prudential Spirit of Community Awards, now in its 20th year, is conducted by Prudential Financial in partnership with the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP).

Mackenzie, a sophomore at Borden, has collected more than 20,000 coats and thousands of hats, scarves and gloves over the past eight years to help people in need stay warm during harsh Indiana winters. When she was in the second grade, Mackenzie's teacher had a talk with her class about how they all should be grateful for the advantages they'd been given.

"She told us that the winter was going to be really cold and that many people do not have the simple necessities in life such as a warm coat," Mackenzie said.

The idea that people were cold in the winter really bothered Mackenzie and responded by going home to tell her parents she wanted to collect coats for people who need them. That was the beginning of "Mackenzie's Coat Closet."

In the early years, Mackenzie simply asked friends and family members for coat donations, stuffed them into a large trash bag and delivered them to local society of St. Vincent DePaul. The first year she collected 79 coats.

By the fourth year, she set a goal of 1,000 coats and knew that to reach her goal she would have to find a better way to gather donation. She came up with the idea of using collection boxes so people could drop off outerwear at businesses, churches, schools and neighborhood sites. She also needed to make more people aware of her project, so she began seeking interviews with local media, speaking at churches and corporations, and communicating through social media and a website.

Today, Mackenzie has 100 collection sites and typically takes in 4,000-5,000 coats a year. Once she collects the donations, a team of volunteers sort and size the coats, then delivers them to St. Vincent DePaul, hang them on hangers like a department store and allow people to choose coats for themselves and family members.

“The people we help have so many obstacles and struggles in their daily lives,” Mackenzie said. “I know that what we do helps to ease some of those struggles.”

As State honorees, Mackenzie and Olivia each will receive \$1,000, an engraved silver medallion and an all-expense paid trip in early May to Washington, D.C., where they will join the top two honorees from each of the other states and the District of Columbia for four days of national recognition events. During the trip, 10 students will be named America’s top youth volunteers.