

Mai Tong Yang: Think big says Boys and Girls Club Youth of the Year

Written by Christina Garner
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Boys and Girls Club of America Midwest Youth of the Year, Mai Tong Yang, plans to dream big as she starts a new chapter in her life – college.

After years of dedication, volunteering and work with the Boys and Girls Club, 19-year-old Yang was acknowledged this past year by getting the organization's title of Midwest Youth of the Year.

The Twin Cities native has been a member of the Boys and Girls Club since she was eight, said Diana Adamson, branch director of the Boys and Girls Club of Mount Airy.

As a refugee of Thailand, Yang sought out the Boys and Girls Club not too long after moving to America. After watching children play across the street from her home, she decided to venture over with friends to what happened to be the local club of Mount Airy.

After years as a member, Yang joined Youth Job Corp the summer before her senior year of high school as part of the St. Paul Parks and Recreation program. From there she became a junior staff member of her Mount Airy club. This opportunity allowed her to gain work experience at a place she loves.

Adamson said Yang's dedication to the club went beyond what was asked of her. She always goes above and beyond, helping out after hours and even coming in on days when she was not scheduled to work, said Adamson.

Yang's hard work was recognized regularly at the club when she was often named Youth of the Month. Adamson said this work ethic inspired staff members to nominate Yang for club Youth of the Year, which then allowed her to compete for Twin Cities Youth of the Year, followed by state and regional competitions, where she was named Midwest Youth of the Year.

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By being chosen to represent the Midwest region of the organization, Yang was afforded the opportunity to meet President Barack Obama.

“He’s very supportive of youth,” said Yang of President Obama.

With the president’s support, Yang said the Boys and Girls Club should be able to develop a national teen advisory committee that will advocate for programs that provide youth with tools needed to lead successful futures.

Besides having the opportunity to meet with President Obama, Yang met other youth leaders representing their regions of the Boys and Girls Club of America. Though they had never met, Yang said they all had a special connection due to their similar backgrounds and love for the organization.

“Apart from the Youth of the Year, I learned a lot about family with the Boys and Girls Club,” said Yang.

The leadership skills she learned from the Boys and Girls Club has not only helped her in school but in life. When Yang went to South Korea, she said what she learned helped her to balance learning the Korean culture with being Hmong and American.

Yang also received a scholarship from Tupperware, which has paid for some of her college education. Yang currently attends school an hour away at the College of Saint Benedict, but always makes an effort to help out with the Boys and Girls Club when she has time.

“Whenever I do go back to the cities I do my best to go and help out and volunteer,” said Yang.

“It (Boys and Girls Club) has always been apart of her life,” said Adamson.

After college, Yang plans to work with a non-profit that focuses on children, but right now she is deciding between political science and communications for her major.

“I think I will continue to promote the message of thinking big,” said Yang. “You must believe in yourself to see your full potential.”