

A BROADER LENS

HHS student creates club to focus on global issues

By Andrew Mundhenk

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Hendersonville High junior Kathryn Thomas is encouraging her peers to look through a global lens.

That's why she formed the nonpartisan Global Lens Club last fall at the school to increase awareness of global issues such as poverty, world hunger and gender equality.

The classroom full of students meets every other Friday morning before the starting bell and discusses a curriculum Thomas created based on the United Nation's 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

Hendersonville High junior Kathryn Thomas, pictured at center in a blue shirt, works on an exercise with students in the Global Lens Club. Thomas formed the club to increase awareness of global issues among her peers. [ANDREW MUNDHENK/TIMES-NEWS]

Friday, International Women's Day, the club focused on gender equality (Goal 5) and global inequalities (Goal 10) using a hands-on activity involving Legos and Jenga.

Thomas was inspired to form the club after serving as a delegate for Girls Scouts of the USA at the United Nations' Commission on the Status of Women last spring. While there, Thomas heard from young women who had human rights-centered clubs at their school. She formed the club as part of her Girl Scout Gold Award project.

"I think just because our (school) curriculum is so jam-packed ... a lot of times current issues can get left out if it's not intentionally added in," Thomas said, adding that students get that information from social media, which can often not be accurate or comprehensive.

Given a set of Legos, students were divided into three groups and asked to create something that symbolizes women, marginalized people or inequalities. The groups made a heart, an "E" for equality and a throne "because women are queens."

Students were then asked to play a game of Jenga. Whichever group finished at the end with the tallest tower won, using only chopsticks to remove and stack pieces.

Each Jenga piece had a statistic taped onto it and students had to read aloud each one they picked. Facts like a girl born in the United Kingdom is likely to live until 83 compared to one born in Swaziland likely to only reach 61. In another one, "Only 10 heads of state or government out of 58 are women in the European Union and Norway," unbeknownst to one group, they started with fewer pieces. The game represented marginalized groups' strive for equality, Thomas said, and the harder climb they have on the social tower because they start with less.

In the coming weeks, the Global Lens Club has plans to participate in a trail cleanup in Pisgah National Forest and create a little library for children living in apartments for Safelight clients.

Thomas even created a website, www.globallensclub.com, that spells out all 17 UN sustainable goals as well as information about the club itself.

"It's really important that we look at issues with a global context and not always think about ourselves," she said. "When you really think about it, there's girls in other countries that can't go to school. The fact that we can and we can use that time here to learn about these things I think is super awesome."

Her teacher and the club's advisor, Jessica Eblen, said Thomas is incredibly committed and plays a very active role in informing others.

"Her level of awareness and passion for important issues like inequality is really inspiring to me as an educator," said Eblen. "That's your dream for all your students to have that passion and thirst for knowledge."

The meetings are held in Eblen's room, but she said the club is entirely studentled and Thomas has taken on every bit of the project.

"I'm essentially just a bystander, which is really cool to be in role because I'm teaching all day," said Eblen. "To sit back and watch and advise when I can, it's fun for me."

Eblen added that she has seen a change in the students involved with the club. "I think for them it's a comfortable place to come where they feel appreciated and talk about issues that are important to them. They are also more aware. I think for a peer to bring that on is really unique."

As part of the Girl Scouts requirements for Gold Award projects, the Global Lens Club must be sustainable. Thomas plans to mentor an underclassman to take ownership of the club when she graduates next year.

"I'll definitely still be involved in the process," Thomas said. "I'm not just going to graduate and say 'bye. I've invested over 180 hours into this project. It would be counterintuitive if I just ditched it."

In addition to her commitments to the club, school and Girl Scouts, Thomas is part of the school's symphonic band and pit orchestra, a student leader in her youth group, a member on the United Way Youth Council and a member on her church's executive board, among others.

More information about the Global Lens Club can be found at www.globallensclub.com.

Hendersonville High junior Kathryn Thomas, right, works on an exercise with students involved in the Global Lens Club. [ANDREW MUNDHENK/TIMES-NEWS]

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