

Area teen awarded \$36K scholarship

Stoneham's Davis gets 'tikkun olam' award for lobbying work

By Juhi Varma

Advocate correspondent

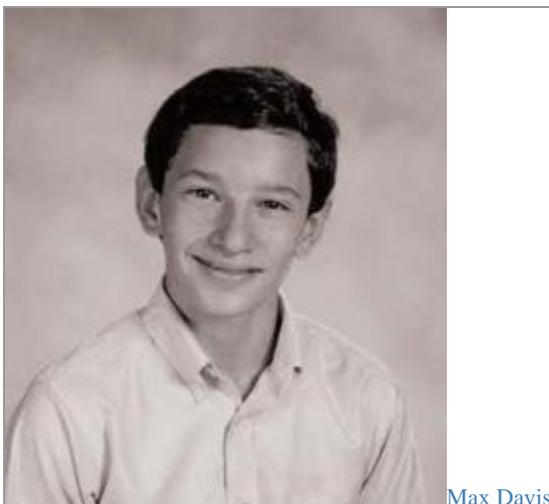


STONEHAM – While many of us ignore people living under bridges, this 14-year-old chose to find a solution and repair the world a little.

Last month, Stoneham High School student Max Davis received a Diller Teen Tikkun Olam award – a \$36,000 scholarship to the college of his choice – in recognition of his advocacy work for “unaccompanied homeless youth,” or young people with neither homes nor families.

The San Francisco-based Helen Diller Family Foundation recognized Davis for creating Legislature in Action-Kids Helping Kids, a community project that engages students in lobbying efforts to provide Boston-area unaccompanied homeless youth with housing and necessary services. Davis was one of 15 students selected for this year's Tikkun Olam award.

In 2013, Davis met Shawn, a young man recently discharged from service in Afghanistan. A health condition had prevented the veteran from completing his tour, but his early discharge also rendered him ineligible for benefits. Shawn, barely out of his teens, was living under a bridge.



This chance encounter brought Davis, then a middle school student, face-to-face with not only the harsh reality of military vets living in the shadows, but also the widespread issue of homelessness among young people.

An unaccompanied homeless youth is a person 24 years of age or younger who is not in the physical custody or care of a parent or legal guardian, and who lacks a fixed, regular nighttime residence.

“Kids shouldn’t have to go through that,” Davis said. “I talked to my parents. We decided to get a bill passed.”

Davis teamed up with four friends from his synagogue, Temple Israel of Boston: Hannah Hummel, Zach Iwatsuki, Sophie Lewis and Esther Trask. The students lobbied persistently at the State House until Massachusetts House Bill 135 was passed into law.

House Bill 135, the Unaccompanied Homeless Youth Act, seeks to provide housing and support services for unaccompanied homeless youth.

“One of the statistics we found,” Davis said, “showed that the number of UHY in Massachusetts is 13,500 – enough to make up the population of a city. And there are many who hide because they don’t want to be found.”

A significant number of unaccompanied homeless youth are young people identifying as LGBT whose families had rejected them.

Davis and his friends founded Legislature in Action-Kids Helping Kids in 2014. They began by drafting talking points, attending meetings with legislators and policymakers, and speaking at public hearings.

“At first, it was really nerve wracking,” Davis said. “Then it got less frightening, and eventually it became one of those things like brushing your teeth.”

The legislature passed the Unaccompanied Homeless Youth Act on Jan. 6, 2015, and it became one of the last items signed into law by then-Gov. Deval Patrick.

Following the establishment of the law, Davis advocated for funding. He convinced legislators to appropriate \$2 million for the services outlined in the legislation.

To date, Legislature in Action- Kids Helping Kids has raised nearly \$8,000 and garnered the support of many local groups. Davis also donated a part of his Tikkun Olam scholarship to the project; the rest, he said, he intends to use to further his education after high school.

The Helen Diller Family Foundation will host a luncheon honoring this year’s Tikkun Olam award recipients in San Francisco on Aug. 22. Davis said he plans to attend with his parents and older sister.

In 10 years, over \$3 million in Teen Tikkun Olam Awards has been distributed to 84 Jewish teens from across the country.

Davis spoke positively about his experiences lobbying legislators.

“Once you talk to them and get on their level, they’re all really nice people,” stated the precocious teen. “I mean, they’re not monsters. They’re like, ‘Hey, how’s your day going?’ and they were interested in what we, as kids, had to say.”

[Close](#)