



WAYNE TILCOCK/ENTERPRISE PHOTOS

Alex Totah roars with laughter as he awaits the start of the city of Davis' Golden Heart Awards ceremony at the Davis City Council meeting Tuesday. Totah was honored for overcoming challenges posed by autism.

# These teens are golden

City honors youths for overcoming challenges, giving outstanding service

By Anne Ternus-Bellamy

ENTERPRISE STAFF WRITER

For more than two decades, the city of Davis' Golden Heart Awards have served two purposes: ensuring that some good can come from even the most unthinkable tragedies, and reminding the community that for every teenager who ends up in the news for the wrong reason, there are countless more youths quietly doing good — and even great — things every day.

The awards were created in the wake of Andrew Mockus' death 22



Davis City Councilman Brett Lee presents flowers to Golden Heart Award winner Alex Sprague, left, accompanied by her friend and supporter Maya Kuppermann. Sprague created A Chance to Dance, a program for children living in Yolo County's migrant centers.

years ago. A 14-year-old Holmes Junior High School student at the time, Mockus was killed by a group of Davis teens who beat him, robbed him and pushed him into the path of a moving train.

Stunned, the city responded by holding public forums to discuss the issues facing the community's youth and ways the city could do more to

See **GOLDEN**, Page A5

# GOLDEN: Teens in spotlight

From Page A1

help. In the end, the Davis City Council adopted seven recommendations that grew out of the forums, including the creation of the Golden Heart Awards, which would honor local teens for the good that they do. The awards would be given annually in two categories: overcoming personal challenges and community service.

## Alex Totah

Alex Totah received this year's Golden Heart Award for overcoming personal challenges, but he likely could have been honored in either category. In overcoming the challenges posed by autism, he also has raised money and awareness for autism research and brought together the community on multiple occasions thanks to his determination, self-confidence and personality.

Totah, a senior at Da Vinci Charter Academy, was nominated for the award by his cousins, Daniella and Julianna Qvistgaard, who in their nomination letter said Totah "has shown us that anything is possible with a little love, self-confidence and self-determination."

It's an opinion shared by the entire Davis High School football team, which this year created the "Alex Totah Award," which will be given annually to a teammate who exudes courage, willingness to sacrifice for others and hard work.

Totah, the son of Suheil and Christine Totah, was diagnosed with autism at an early age, leaving his family to wonder if he'd be able to talk or make eye contact with others.

Tuesday's Golden Heart awards ceremony before the City Council showed that wasn't the case — not only did Totah speak to the standing-room-only crowd in the Community Chambers, he received a rousing standing ovation from the many family and friends who turned out to celebrate him.

These are many of the same community members who have accompanied Team Alex in Sacramento's annual Walk Now for Autism Speaks, a rally and walk aimed at raising money and awareness for autism. For six years, the team organized by Totah has participated, including last October, when students from Da Vinci, Davis High and Harper Junior High School — as well as teammates and coaches from the DHS football team and many other Totah family members and friends — walked with Totah.

And if all that weren't enough, Totah also has volunteered at Sacramento Camp Rec, helping children with disabilities, and volunteered at local homeless shelters.

In accepting the award, Totah thanked his cousins for nominating him,

*"What I do, I do because I love it. I love working with kids."*

**Amelia Otto-Cutting**  
sophomore, Da Vinci Charter Academy

saying, "It was amazing getting this award. ... I was so surprised."

## Alex Sprague

Equally surprised by her award was Alex Sprague, nominated by her grandmother, Gloria Regan, for her community service.

A lifelong dancer, Sprague has appeared as the Sugar Plum Fairy in the "Davis Children's Nutcracker" and has spent the past six years studying with the Sacramento Ballet.

Two years ago, she decided to take her passion for dance and share it with children who otherwise might not get a chance to experience it.

Along with her close friend, Maya Kuppermann, Sprague created A Chance to Dance, a program for children living in area migrant centers.

Sprague's mother, Karen Sprague, is a nurse with Community Medical Centers, which serve the Davis and Madison migrant centers, and her daughter's idea for a dance class fit in perfectly with the centers' "Commit to be Fit" physical education program.

The summer before last, classes got underway at the Madison Migrant Center, with Sprague and Kuppermann meeting with children ages 5 to 10 every other week. The kids loved it from the start, Sprague said, and even began designing their own choreography.

Last summer, A Chance to Dance expanded to the Davis Migrant Center, with Sprague and Kuppermann alternately weekly between Madison and Davis.

"I'm really happy I could share my passion for dance with children who are less fortunate," Sprague said in receiving her Golden Heart Award.

Now a senior at Davis High, Sprague will be heading off to college before long, but hopes her dance program will continue on without her. She already has some younger dancers from Davis lined up to take over, she said Tuesday.

And she plans to keep on dancing herself.

"There are not enough adjectives to adequately describe what an outstanding teenager and wonderful girl she is," Regan said of Sprague in her nomination letter.

Kuppermann agrees. "It was a great experience to teach with Alex and put a few smiles on the kids' faces," Kuppermann said.

## Amelia Otto-Cutting

An equally outstanding teenager, Amelia Otto-Cutting, also

received a Golden Heart Award for community service.

Just a sophomore at Da Vinci Charter Academy, Otto-Cutting already has left an extraordinary mark on her community. As a lifelong Girl Scout, she has served as a program aide at the annual Davis Girl Scout Day Camp, designed a comprehensive program for a weeklong camp this summer, helped to develop and deliver a nutrition education program for low-income preschoolers and, back in sixth grade, oversaw a diaper drive for the Short-Term Emergency Aid Committee.

Outside of Scouts, Otto-Cutting created and implemented an orientation program for incoming eighth- and ninth-grade students at Da Vinci Junior High.

Her reason for doing so was pretty simple, she said: There was nothing like that when she arrived in junior high. She has overseen the program the past two years.

As for all of her other work, which also includes serving as a volunteer at the city's Camp Putah and at karate camps, Otto-Cutting has a simple expiation for that as well.

"What I do, I do because I love it," Otto-Cutting said. "I love working with kids."

Many adults in the community have taken note, including the four who nominated her for a Golden Heart: Linda Casillas, Brenda Cameron, Julie Loke and Cynthia Kerr.

In their nomination letter, the women said Otto-Cutting "is sincere about sharing her experiences, teaching younger girls and setting a positive example of how young adults really can make a difference in their community by following their passions."

That's something that could be said of all of this year's winners.

Also nominated for their community service this year were Christian Blair, Ilana Creinin and Adam Siegel. Davis teen Emma Lassen was a nominee in the personal challenge category. All four also were recognized by the City Council on Tuesday night.

Any community member can nominate a Davis teen for a Golden Heart Award. Nominations are typically accepted late in the year with the awards ceremony always taking place in February. Find out more by calling the city's Community Services Department at 530-747-5626.

— Reach Anne Ternus-Bellamy at [aternus@davisenterprise.net](mailto:aternus@davisenterprise.net)



**OTTO-CUTTING**  
Lifelong Girl Scout