

# McLean CONNECTION

## Bringing a 'Brain Blast' To Life

**Sisters create a nationwide treasure hunt to raise scholarship money for U.S. troops' dependents.**

By Aranya Tomseth

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It all started with a family vacation and Michael Stadther's book "A Treasure Trove." In the summer of 2005, Kelsi Okun, 8, and her sister Rachel Okun, 10, poured over the book, trying desperately to decipher its clues and find at least one of 12 jewels hidden in various locations in the United States.

"The whole family got really excited about it," said Rachel.

Since the 12 one-of-a-kind jewels had a combined value of over \$1 million, "treasure hunters" all over the country were working on the riddles and puzzles in Stadther's book. Despite their best efforts, the Okun family, who reside in McLean, was unable to locate any of the jewels. When Kelsi and Rachel's aunt informed them that the last one had finally been found, their hearts sank.

"We were really feeling down in the dumps about it because it had been so much fun," said Rachel.

However, their disappointment ultimately led to a moment of creative inspiration that has taken them further than they ever could have imagined. The girls refer to this moment as their "brain blast."

"We thought, if we can't figure out someone else's treasure hunt, maybe we can make our own," said Rachel. "And our parents, instead of saying no, they said yes."

When Kelsi and Rachel broached the idea of creating their own national treasure hunt, their parents listened with an open mind.

"We said to the girls, if you did this, what would you do to make it more than just a treasure hunt?" said their mother Deanna Okun, who is Vice Chairman of the United States International Trade Commission.

The girls had previously sent care packages to U.S. troops in Iraq and had found the experience rewarding, and both also felt that more should be done to show appreciation for the men and women serving in the military. After giving it some thought and researching current programs, the Okun family agreed that they would like to start a program that would provide scholarship funds to the children and spouses of American troops. Kelsi and Rachel were certain that a treasure hunt could only help their new cause.

"We thought, if people get so excited about finding treasure, could we get them to focus their energy on something useful to help someone else?" said Rachel. "Treasure hunts get people excited, they're really fun and everybody loves a good treasure hunt."

IN ORDER TO START the scholarship program, the Okun family first went before Congress to ask for support.

"There was considerable interest among Democrats, Republicans, Senators and Congressman," said Robert Okun, the girls' father. "They said, 'we'll give you



Photo by Aranya Tomseth/The Connection

**Kelsi Okun, 8, and Rachel Okun, 10, with their dog and the ThanksUSA mascot, Miles.**

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some seed money to get it up and running,' so we were able to get \$4 million." With that part of the project underway, the family turned their attention to the creation of a treasure hunt.

"Rachel's teacher was tutoring us, and one day we told her about the project, and she thought it was a great idea, so we asked her to help us," said Kelsi. "She's a big part of it."

That teacher, Carolyn Ferek, had been Rachel's third grade teacher at Franklin Sherman Elementary School. With her help, and the help of various friends and neighbors, the family was able to put together a book that contains 12 state-oriented puzzles.

"I've never done anything like this before," said Ferek. "We tried to make sure that the questions were doable by school-age children, and we had mostly grown-ups working on it, but it was fun and challenging for all members of the family."

On most Friday evenings and Sunday afternoons, everyone would gather around the Okun dining room table and brainstorm ideas for the treasure hunt.

"For me what was so much fun was that it was just this small neighborhood group," said Bob Okun. "We called it the Dining Room Table Group."

Prize winners for each of the 12 stages of the hunt will be selected randomly from a group of all those who submit a correct answer to any particular stage. Participants who successfully solve all 12 stages of the hunt will be eligible for the grand prize which is a "very special" tour of Washington, D.C.

Prizes include a family vacation to Universal Studios and Walt Disney World theme parks in Orlando, Fla.; a family package of mountain bikes and a Harley Davidson motorcycle; a visit to the Pyramids in Egypt; a trip to the 2007 Super Bowl; and a vacation to London, England. All of the prizes were donated by various sources.

"We're offering such cool prizes that I'm hoping that people will want to participate and won't mind learning history," said Rachel.

CAROLYN FERREK said that she has been particularly impressed with the willingness of so many people to volunteer their services for free.

"We had to get lawyers and Web sites, and everything has been done for us pro bono," said Ferek. "This was such an undertaking for me, and a real learning experience. We never knew it was going to become as big as it did... but it just blossomed."

The Gate Worldwide, a creative agency, offered to produce a commercial for the project free of charge. The Okun family met with executives from the company and then watched the actual filming of the spot.

"We got to see what they were thinking and see it come to life," said Rachel. Both Bob and Deanna Okun are very proud of their daughters, and say they are happy that they could help to teach them the value of taking action and helping others.

"These are very special girls, and they work really well together," said Bob Okun.

Ferek agrees, but said she also has incredible respect for their parents for being so supportive every step of the way.

"These are some of the most amazing girls that you will ever come across," said Ferek. "It almost sounds like we are making this up... and that their parents are involved is really cool. As a parent your kids often say really good ideas, and you say 'oh that's a good idea,' and then forget about it."

The ThanksUSA treasure hunt will kick off with a special event at Franklin Sherman Elementary School on May 26, and will run through the end of the summer. More than likely, this is only the first of many "brain blasts" from

Rachel and Kelsi Okun.

"There is no explanation for how good it feels to help other people," said Rachel. "I think that's one of the reasons why we are put here on this earth — to make your mark."

In fact, Rachel already has plans for her next mark.

"I'd like to write a book about how you shouldn't abandon animals," she said.



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