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Highlander Charter School ‘Shark Tank’ Competition Leads to Project Seed Money for Students to Advance Ideas, Explore Entrepreneurship

BankRI charitable grant provides funds to award a “Shark Tank Scholarship” to four students

PROVIDENCE, R.I. – A group of four students at Highlander Charter School in Providence each marked the end of their school year by being awarded a “Shark Tank Scholarship” to advance their business ideas and explore entrepreneurship. The students’ opportunity was part of the school’s innovative Aspiring Business Owners and Entrepreneurs Pilot Program, which culminated with a total of eight students presenting their business ideas to a panel of volunteer judges. The \$2,000 available in scholarships was provided by **Bank Rhode Island (BankRI)**, which awarded the school a \$2,500 charitable grant in support of the effort.

Highlander’s pilot program is held in partnership with Dan Shedd, CEO of Taylor Box Company in Warren. For the past two years, Dan has hosted an expanded learning opportunity, welcoming 15-20 students to his company to introduce them to and teach about the various aspects of running a business. As a way to further their experience, Dan worked with fellow area businesses to expose students to operating a manufacturing business and a family-owned restaurant.

New to this year’s program was the addition of a “Shark Tank”-like competition, in which students vied for a scholarship to grow their passions, career interests, and ideas. Each participant began by preparing an essay explaining their idea, how funds would be used if they were selected, and how their idea would further their future career goals. Once a student’s idea was accepted, they were invited to present their proposal to a panel of volunteer judges that included Manny Barrows, SVP, Team Leader, BankRI; Will Tsonos, SVP, Director of Commercial Banking, BankRI; Dan Shedd; Jock Hayes, Director of Audience and Engagement for East Bay Newspapers; Rose Mary Grant, Head of School, Highlander Charter School; and Frank Picciotti, HR Director and Business Manager, Highlander Charter School.

Each of the four students awarded funds will begin their senior year in September and will report on the progress of their business ideas when school reconvenes. The students selected and their ideas are:

- **Nicole Benitez** is passionate about a career in photography and was mentored by a professional photographer during the 2017-18 school year while saving to buy a camera. She was awarded a scholarship to purchase Photoshop software in order to edit images and take her work to the next level. She was recently invited to photograph Highlander’s annual golf tournament.
- **Kaelyn Rodriguez** enjoys an existing small business in which she designs and paints one-of-a-kind sneakers and baseball hats, along with refurbishing high-end sneakers. Her scholarship is supporting the purchase of equipment and supplies that will enable her to take on additional projects and scale her business.

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- **Jeremy Anim** currently designs digital banners for a variety of YouTube channels. He was awarded a scholarship to purchase components to build a new PC with extra capabilities that will help him expand his business' offerings.
- **Nicholas Middlemiss** is in the process of creating a three-dimensional model that he will use to develop code in order to turn his vision into a computer game. He is using his funds to purchase the materials needed to build the model.

“When we were approached by Highlander Charter School to get involved with and support their Aspiring Business Owners and Entrepreneurs Program, we saw it as a unique opportunity to help students pursue their future career goals,” said Will Tsonos, SVP, Director of Commercial Banking, BankRI. “It was extremely impressive to see the high-quality ideas and presentations that came out of the program, which underscore the entrepreneurial spirit that is so important to our economy – all of us at BankRI wish the students nothing but success as they follow their dreams.”

“Highlander is very grateful for the support of BankRI, which has allowed us to further develop our partnership with Dan Shedd and advance our business and entrepreneurial program through the creation of the Shark Tank competition,” added Rose Mary Grant, Highlander’s Head of School. “Our students are certainly fortunate to be afforded these opportunities through the generosity of both BankRI and Dan Shedd from Taylor Box, and the local businesses that opened their doors to them.”

About Bank Rhode Island

Bank Rhode Island, a wholly owned subsidiary of Brookline Bancorp, Inc. (NASDAQ:BRKL), is a full-service, FDIC-insured financial institution headquartered in Providence, Rhode Island. The bank operates 20 branches and more than 55 ATMs throughout Providence, Kent, Newport and Washington Counties. For more information, visit www.bankri.com. You can also find BankRI on Facebook at www.Facebook.com/BankRhodeIsland.

About Highlander Charter School

Highlander Charter School was founded in 2000 as Rhode Island’s first Independent Charter Public School. Highlander Charter School does not discriminate on the basis of age, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, race, color, religion, national origin or disability. Highlander enrolls students in grades pre-kindergarten through 12 from districts across the state. Highlander’s mission is to provide all learners with the tools and supports they need to be successful in school and beyond. For more information, visit www.highlandercharter.org.

About Taylor Box Company

Founded in Providence, RI, in 1885; Taylor Box is a design-manufacturer of luxury and premium paperboard packaging located in Warren, RI. The company employs 48, and serves leading brands and emerging businesses from across the United States in a broad array of markets.

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