

TikTok challenge doesn't define all teenagers



Jerry Davich

You've probably heard about the recent rash of vandalism to school bathrooms across the country, thanks to impressionable teenagers through a TikTok video challenge that's gone viral.

The "devious licks" challenge prompts students to post videos of themselves destroying fixtures, stealing soap dispensers, damaging fire extinguishers and other idiotic mischief. Last week, eight students from Hobart faced formal vandalism charges in Lake County Juvenile Court in connection with the destruction of school property.

Before you shake your head back and forth and condemn "kids these days," let me tell you about another group of Hobart teenagers you likely know nothing about. Their recorded video of themselves destroying social stereotypes hasn't gone viral but it should.

"I love being able to serve in this organization and have it be an outlet for me to act on my passion for community service," Elijah Puente tells viewers.



Puente

"Last year, our program Key Clubbers Got Talent raised over \$8,500 for Riley Children's Hospital, and we did it during a worldwide pandemic," Gianna Rodriguez tells viewers. "This year we decided to raise \$15,000 in donations."



Rodriguez

"Key Club is an amazing organization and has numerous leadership opportunities for you to join and to help your community and school," Louis Gallegos says on



Gallegos

the video.

The Hobart High School students are members of the school's award-winning Key Club, an international service organization for high school students that encourages leadership through serving others. Puente is the organization's Indiana district governor, Rodriguez is lieutenant governor of the Potawatomi division, and Gallegos is lieutenant governor of the Duneland division.

"Our Key Club is considered the leading club in the state," said Heidi Polizotto, a HHS world language teacher and Key Club adviser. "We've won a lot of awards over the last five years

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and we also have three lieutenant governors, the District Bulletin editor and the district governor serving from Hobart High School.”

Polizotto is proud of her students and she should be. As other teenagers around the world are being duped by an endless stream of TikTok video challenges, her Key Club teens are performing community service projects and interacting in a positive way with older generations of leaders.

“I am *beyond* proud of them and all that they have accomplished, including their goals for this year,” said Polizotto, who also serves as district administrator of the Indiana District of Key Club International.

Their current project, Hearts for the Homeless, “challenges” them to create 25 sleeping mats to the tent cities sometime in December, just before Christmas,” Polizotto told me last month when I interviewed her students via Zoom. I planned on writing about their project in December, when they delivered their mats to Chicago residents in need. But this latest TikTok video challenge — daring kids into vandalizing their schools — sped up my plan, especially when I found out that Hobart High School



Hobart High School students Kendall Lemon, Abby Joswiak, Nejere Onomakpome, Bridget Chavez and Shanena Knight use special looms to make sleeping mats from plastic grocery bags as part of Hearts for the Homeless, a Key Club service project. **HOBART HIGH SCHOOL**

“We intend to go straight to the tent cities sometime in December, just before Christmas,” Polizotto told me last month when I interviewed her students via Zoom.

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was also targeted.

One expert who studies juvenile crimes said decades before the arrival of social media, some adolescents viewed vandalism as a way to enhance their peer group status.

“Vandalism is acting out in a malicious way, and it’s an act of aggression that is communicating a message against property. But ultimately it is aimed at people, and at an institution, in this case, their school,” Arthur Lurigio, a professor of psychology and criminal

justice at Loyola University Chicago, told the Chicago Tribune.

Hobart’s Key Club members, including Meghan Horn, lieutenant governor of Calumet division, and Bulletin editor Caryssa Roark, are the antithesis of those misguided and mischievous TikTok teenagers.

“The kids are phenomenal,” said Bob Flood, a member of the Hobart Kiwanis Club. “Hobart High School’s Key Club won three top awards at

the Kiwanis international convention at Florida’s Disney World.”

Flood contacted two months ago to share this news with me, noting that fellow Hobart Kiwanian, Sheila DeBonis, won an award for outstanding sponsor to the school’s Key Club.

“I think the overarching story here is the tight local interplay of generations for the common good,” Flood said. “As a case in point, for our 2019 Hobart Food Pantry drive we hit some

8,000 homes in just six hours, thanks to the help of Key Club runners and from the school’s Junior ROTC. The public needs to know what a feat it is to cover thousands of Hobart homes in just a few hours, the logistics of it all.”

Last month, the Hobart Kiwanis hosted a breakfast meeting and invited Key Club students to join them. The kids shared details of their current goals and projects, including the Key Clubbers Got Talent telethon on Oct. 9. (Yes, sponsorships are needed.)

It’s second nature for most adults to bad-mouth teenagers when we hear about things like the latest TikTok challenge. However, when we have a chance to praise — or help — other teens who are serving our communities and improving our world, we too often shrug it off. Shame on us.

Today’s column is a challenge to *you* to assist the Key Club’s projects, share their video, donate plastic bags, sponsor their talent show or, if anything, tell them thanks for their efforts. You can send an email to their award-winning adviser, Heidi Polizotto, at polizotto@class@hobart.k12.in.us. Tick tock, I say.

“Thank you for this amazing opportunity to be in a newspaper column,” one of her students told me. No, thank YOU.

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