

A Quarter-Century of Honoring Young Hams

“We’re just not getting young people interested in amateur radio anymore.” “We need to do something to get more young people involved in the hobby.” “It’s not like the old days, when ham radio was about the only thing available to a kid who was interested in technology.” We all hear these comments all the time. Many of us also make them. Some of us are actively working to recruit young people to ham radio. The interesting thing is that these same comments were being heard, and made, and acted on, a generation ago.

One of the people who tried to “do something about it” back then was Bill Pasternak, WA6ITF, producer of Amateur Radio Newline (then named the Westlink Report). In 1986, Bill rolled out the Westlink Report Young Ham of the Year Award, presented to a ham 18 years of age or younger “who has provided outstanding service to the nation, his/her community, or the betterment of the state of the art in communications through the Amateur Radio hobby/service.” Over the years, corporate co-sponsors joined in, including CQ magazine, Yaesu (Vertex-Standard), and, most recently, Heil Sound. Now, 25 young hams have been honored for their contributions to the hobby and/or their communities, the latest of whom is Cody Anderson, KI4FUV, of Harriman, Tennessee, who was presented his award in August at the Huntsville Hamfest.

So the question becomes ... after 25 years, is it working? How has the award helped the winners and has it helped bring additional young hams into the hobby? Bill contacted as many of the past winners as he could to find out. Here’s what some of them have been up to:

Shawn Wakefield, WK5P, the first Young Ham of the Year in 1986, is an electrical engineer who now owns his own software consulting company and is developing applications for mobile devices. His wife and two eldest children all are hams.

David Rosenman, KA9PMK (1987), is a doctor at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota; Erin McGinniss Gerety, KA0WTE (1989) is a Shakespearean actress; 1990 winner Mary Alestra, KB2IGG, is an attorney; 1991 YHOTY Sammy Garrett, AA0CR, holds a Ph.D. in political science and is an analyst for the Congressional Research Service and an Adjunct Professor at American University in Washington, DC; 1999 winner Brian Milesosky, N5ZGT, is currently ARRL Rocky Mountain Division Director and a member of the YHOTY judging committee.

Two past winners were at this year’s YHOTY award presentation—Christopher Arthur, NV4B (2000), and Andrea Hartlage, KG4IUM (2004). Chris is an active contesteer and works as a software design engineer with some part-time work in broadcasting. His senior design project at the University of Alabama at Huntsville (from which he graduated Magna Cum Laude in 2006) was a packet radio telemetry device that flew on several BalloonSat launches. Andrea is a junior at Georgia Tech, pursuing a degree in aeronautical engineering and a goal of becoming an astronaut—a goal she set after attending Space Camp as part of her YHOTY award package. (CQ provides each winner with a free week at space camp.) Andrea has been working to bring more young people into ham radio ever since she became a ham herself and is the sparkplug behind the “youth lounges” found at many hamfests today, including the Dayton Hamvention®.

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A crowded stage at the 2010 Young Ham of the Year award presentation at the Huntsville Hamfest. From left, 2000 YHOTY winner Christopher Arthur, NV4B; 2004 winner Andrea Hartlage, KG4IUM; Vertex-Standard (Yaesu) representative Jerry Darby, N6UME; Chip Margelli, K7JA, of Heil Sound; 2010 Young Ham of the Year Cody Anderson, KI4FUV; CQ Editor Rich Moseson, W2VU; and Newline Producer/YHOTY Founder Bill Pasternak, WA6ITF. (Photo by Joe Eisenberg, K0NEB)

Is the YHOTY program working? Unquestionably, yes, and not only in ways directly related to amateur radio. More than one past winner told how this award had given them added self-confidence and motivation to achieve more in their chosen fields, and they have provided great examples to other young hams. Perhaps the greatest benefit of this award—not only for the YHOTY winners but even those who are nominated but not selected—is best wrapped up by 1990 winner Mary Alestra, KB2IGG, who said: “There have been a lot of great moments in my life since then, including graduating from college and law school, but the YHOTY award may have been the most important, since it helped me realize that all of these goals were possible.”

Congratulations to Bill, WA6ITF, and everyone connected with the Young Ham of the Year program, for a quarter-century of success in drawing attention to outstanding young people in ham radio. The job of continuing to recruit and cultivate young hams is ongoing, though, and the responsibility is all of ours. After all, it is local clubs that encourage ham radio growth and participation by young amateurs, and encourage them to do great things.

One thing *has* changed in the past 25 years, and changed for the better: Older hams and ham radio clubs have become much more welcoming of younger hams. Around the same timeframe in which Bill was starting up the YHOTY program, I was ARRL Section Manager for Northern New Jersey, and I appointed the country’s first Assistant Section Manager for Youth. I clearly recall that this young man went to a club meeting, as my representative, to speak about our plans for youth-focused activities in the section, and was basically told to sit down and shut up.

I never hear of anything like that happening today, and the majority of ARRL sections today have Youth ASMs. Thankfully, the old saying which greeted me as a 15-year-old Novice in 1970—“No lids, no kids, no space cadets”—seems to have faded into ham radio oblivion, replaced by a “Kids Welcome” sign on our front gate. It is a necessity. Yesterday’s young hams are already becoming today’s ham radio leaders, and today’s young hams unquestionably will follow.

—73, W2VU