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A BUSINESS FIRST SPECIAL PUBLICATION THAT RECOGNIZES THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF TOMORROW'S LEADERS

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An Indiana State Police trooper and his K-9 companion give a demonstration to students in Leadership Southern Indiana's NEXGEN program.

LEADERSHIP SOUTHERN INDIANA

NEXGEN aims to combat S. Ind.'s 'brain drain'

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Southern Indiana's NEX-GEN is bursting at the seams – and that's a good thing, says Mark Eddy, executive director of Leadership Southern Indiana, which operates the youth-leadership program.

Applications topped out at 119 this year, Eddy said, and thanks to a sponsorship from First Savings Bank, 84 students were able to participate – nearly twice the number of students from previous years.

The program is open to high school juniors in Southern Indiana and aims to strengthen teamwork skills, while increasing awareness of the region's economy, government and human-services sectors. Participants also work together on a project that benefits a local nonprofit.

Now in its fourth year, Eddy said he believes NEXGEN is accomplishing one of its major goals: to get kids excited about returning to Southern Indiana once they've finished college.

"We want them to see the region as a place where they can come back to be successful," he said.

Keegan Allred, one of this year's NEXGEN alums, is exactly the kind of talented, high-performing student that Leadership Southern Indiana would like to retain in the region.

A junior at Renaissance Academy, a public high school in Clarksville that focuses on alternative ways of teaching and learning, the 17-year-old will graduate in June – a full year early. He's already earned enough college-level credits to be on the cusp of receiving

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Students in Leadership Southern Indiana's NEXGEN program watch a demonstration from state police.

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his associate's degree.

"I consider it a pretty cool privilege to be able to be selected and be a part of NEXGEN," said Allred, who plans to attend Indiana University in Bloomington this fall, where he'll major in computer science.

Allred's NEXGEN service group organized a fundraising dance for Communities in Schools, a nonprofit that supports afterschool care for children in need of clothing or food during winter and other school breaks. Together, they raised more than $4,000 for the organization.

Allred said NEXGEN opened his eyes to the career potential in the area.

"I actually tell people how my plan had always been to leave the area after college and find somewhere new. But I didn't realize all the places in our community like Samtech – really big companies right in our backyard," he said. "Now my plan is to stay in this area, and hopefully give back to my community like they've done for me."

Eddy said NEXGEN is not only engaging students, but attracting attention in the business and civic community for its success. The program was honored with an "Excellence in Innovation" award from the Indiana Leadership Association, and it was a finalist for Nonprofit of the Year at the recent One Southern Indiana's One Awards.

Anne Darku, director of programs for Leadership Southern Indiana, said she's surprised how high attendance has been

Students in Leadership Southern Indiana's NEXGEN program gather around an Indiana State Police trooper and his K-9 during a recent program.

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for the program, considering how many students are juggling multiple responsibilities with sports and other extracurriculars.

"We're grateful to see their buy-in to learning from their community and learning about each other. Their enthusiasm has been really inspiring," she said. "We want the students to be thinking about themselves as leaders. We want them to explore how they see themselves, how they see the community and how as a leader they can give back to the community."

Visit Leadershipsi.org for more information. ◢