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## Do Something Awards to Honor 5 Young ‘World-Changers’

(July 16) — The **Do Something Awards** honor “the best young world-changers, 25 and under, (who) are making the world a better place.” The winner will receive \$100,000 to fund his or her cause at the televised award show Monday night, and it’s still not too late to **vote**, for both the world-changers and celebrity do-gooders.

Do Something’s mission, as its website reads, is “to inspire, empower and celebrate a generation of doers: young people who recognize the need to do something, believe in their ability to get it done, and then take action.”

The hip, irreverent award show will air live at 9 p.m. EDT Monday from Hollywood on VH1 with Jane Lynch of “Glee” hosting.

This year’s five finalists represent a range of causes, including public health in Haiti, a theater where the disabled can participate and a genocide-prevention program. All five have taken the time to speak to AOL News about their inspiration and how anyone, anywhere can make a difference.

**Wilfredo Perez Jr., 23, Public Health Education and Training Program for Haitian Youth**

*Tell us about your cause or organization.*

Through education, I am mobilizing communities in Haiti, equipping them with the tools they need to take control over their own health. These efforts are most important in rural Haiti where there are no doctors and where the people themselves must save their own lives.

By teaching local volunteers information about a variety of issues including hygiene, sanitation, nutrition and water quality — along with testing, treatment and prevention strategies aimed at reducing the incidence of diseases common in the area — countless lives are being saved and communities of people are being empowered.

I am a second-year medical student who has been working in Haiti for the last three years. Living in Haiti for a year, I trained 16 orphaned youth and formed a public health team. The team went on to provide hundreds of children and adults with tuberculosis treatment and drastically reduced malaria cases in their area, along with reductions in waterborne pathogens, bed bugs and parasitic infections through simple preventive measures.

More than 1,200 patients were directly treated, and nearly 10,000 benefited from the public health efforts.

*Who or what inspired you to do something?*

There was no defining moment that inspired me to take action. I spent most of my childhood moving from house to house and shelter to shelter, switching schools a dozen times before graduating. I learned courage and tenacity, watching my mother fight every day for our survival.

With the support of many, I became the first person in my family to graduate from high school. The obstacles I've overcome and struggles I've faced have painted for me a clearer picture of the world and my place in it.

I was still in high school when I picked up a New York Times article with a picture of a Haitian woman baking clay biscuits of sand and water, to feed her children. I hung the picture above my bed and for weeks, it was the only thing I could talk about. I woke every morning to that picture, and made the same promise, that I would give my life to put an end to that kind of suffering.

*Other than donating money, what can people do to help your cause?*

More important to me than money is that people stay informed and continue to educate themselves on the issues of global poverty and the importance of preventive medicine. My work comes down to believing that the standard of health care should be universal and that health care is a basic human right not to be denied of anyone.

I am setting out to change minds. I want to change the way medicine is practiced, how it is distributed and how it is defined.

*How do you stay motivated and inspired?*

I have faith in myself. I believe that the work I do triggers a cascade of positive change whether in the mind of an individual or an entire community.

After seeing my mother go undiagnosed with advanced cervical cancer because she lacked health insurance for regular check-ups, my drive runs deep and is unstoppable.

*What advice would you give other young people who want to do something?*

Believe in what you do, that your voice is being heard and that your efforts are not overlooked. Fight and don't stop no matter how hopeless the situation appears. Share what you know with those around you. Don't underestimate your ability to inspire others.

***In Wilfredo's own words:***

"I'd been living in Haiti for two weeks when a priest asked me to help Lixier and his mother. Lixier, a 3-month-old baby boy with hydrocephalus, needed an emergency operation to place a shunt in his head that would alleviate the pressure on his brain from excess spinal fluid. His head was three times the normal size and soft to the touch.

"An organization in the U.S. had arranged

for Lixier's surgery and found a host family for them. A visit to the American embassy revealed that even a dying child was not worthy of an emergency medical visa without the necessary documents. In the blazing sun, we walked the streets of Port-au-Prince, begging and pleading his case to officials. We were turned away everywhere we went.

"The hospital held an emergency meeting to consider the case. Two weeks later, the stars had aligned and Lixier and his mother were on a plane to the U.S.

"Even the best surgeons couldn't avoid an infection. Luckily, he was still in the States when this happened and was treated. Follow-up care is crucial, and the post-operative treatment he needs is not available in Haiti, making a minor infection a death sentence. When I saw Lixier last, he was nearly a year old and smiling."

### **Micaela Connery, 23, Unified Theater**

*Tell us about your cause or organization.*

With the help of amazing student leaders, I run an organization called Unified Theater. Founded in 2002, Unified Theater works with middle and high school students to develop theater groups that equally feature students of all abilities.

Whether a student has a disability or doesn't, is a star performer or has stage fright, is an athlete or thespian, wants to dance front and center or work behind the

scenes — there is a place for everyone in Unified Theater groups.

We're working with 325 schools by 2015, serving more than 40,000 young people with and without disabilities.

*Who or what inspired you to do something?*

Kelsey taught me everything I know about seeing ability first and giving everyone a chance to shine. Kelsey is my cousin, we're two months apart, and she has developmental and physical disabilities. But Kelsey taught me not to treat her differently or assume she couldn't do something because of her disabilities.

That's why I started Unified Theater. We see ability over disability, we strive for creativity over conformity, and we promote collaboration over competition.

*Other than donating money, what can people do to help your cause?*

Become a student leader. Each Unified Theater group is entirely student-led, and the shows are completely student-written and -developed. If you're a middle or high school student, we want you to join the Unified Theater team, and we can help you every step of the way as you start a group.

*How do you stay motivated and inspired?*

Over the last eight years — working with students, training leaders, visiting rehearsals and seeing productions — I've

met so many incredible students who have made significant contributions to their community because of their participation in Unified Theater. The idea that I know there are so many other students out there that could benefit from and make contributions in Unified Theater groups inspires me to keep pushing to make this organization grow and sustain.

*What advice would you give other young people who want to do something?*

Individuals who “do something” — start organizations, lead campaigns, advocate for change or take on big projects — are, in most cases, risk-takers. Failure is a reality to be taken as an energizing jump start, not as a roadblock. So, as young do-ers, push yourself to keep taking risks, keep testing boundaries and not let failures get you down — know they’re just another part of the journey.

***In Micaela’s own words:***

“There are so many little moments in each Unified Theater production that, to the audience, may seem like just a line, a song or a dance. But the reality is, each of those moments is a result of amazing student leadership and a thoughtful attention to the abilities, needs and interests of each participant.

“One of these moments was in 2005 when Isabelle proudly said her line. Isabelle doesn’t use much verbal language, but Jeff, an incredible student leader, decided he was going to do everything in his power to have Isabelle

say a line in a show. He realized that somewhere along the way Isabelle learned that each time someone said ‘soda pop,’ she’d respond, ‘Coca-Cola.’ So Jeff had the students write an entire skit around this.

“The night of the performances, while her mom watched with tears, Isabelle perfectly delivered her lines. Jeff made that moment possible.

“We’re not about a production; we are about the moments that let every student shine.”

**Jessica Posner, 23, The Kibera School for Girls and Shining Hope Community Center**

*Tell us about your cause or organization.*

Lucy lives in the largest slum in Africa: the Kibera slum of Nairobi, Kenya. At age 6, Lucy began to trade sex for food to survive.

Lucy is just one of nearly half a million young women in Kibera denied education and made to suffer daily indignities. But in August 2009, Lucy became a student at the Kibera School for Girls.

My nonprofit, Shining Hope for Communities, has developed an innovative, two-step model to combat intergenerational cycles of extreme poverty and gender inequality in Nairobi’s Kibera slum. We link free schools for girls to holistic community centers that provide residents with the most essential services

unavailable elsewhere.

*Who or what inspired you to do something?*

In fall 2007, I worked with a youth organization in Kibera to write and perform a play about the realities of extreme poverty. Living in Kibera, I formed a life-changing friendship with Cathy. Through hard work she got a sponsor to pay her school fees. However, her mother burned Cathy's belongings, angry that she was not doing enough housework. Cathy then moved in with her father, who abused and impregnated her.

Soon after, Cathy told me that she found a lump in her breast but that she was unable to afford medical care, as she could not even feed her infant son. I found a doctor willing to help, but I never saw Cathy again. She disappeared, and I learned one of Kibera's most harsh lessons: There is such a thing as too late.

*Other than donating money, what can people do to help your cause?*

People can tell their friends, spread the word about the plight of people in Kibera and donate desperately needed supplies. We need a copy machine, computers, shoes for our students, soccer uniforms and cleats.

*How do you stay motivated and inspired?*

I am always inspired by Kennedy Odede, the co-founder of Shining Hope for Communities. The oldest in a poor family

of eight in Kibera, Kennedy sold peanuts on the road at age 7 to put himself and siblings through school.

I met Kennedy in fall 2007 when we worked together on a theater project with young people. Three days after I left Kenya, the country erupted in horrific political violence and Kennedy was forced to flee. Kennedy had always dreamed of a college education, but never thought this would become a reality because he earned under \$1 per day. I helped facilitate Kennedy's application to Wesleyan University, where he is now a sophomore.

Kennedy inspires me because he fought against all odds to create remarkable change in both his community and his own life.

*What advice would you give other young people who want to do something?*

I believe in moving forward not in spite of, but because of, great challenges. Things happen when we keep going while everyone around us tells us to give up. The world is a place filled with great needs. By collaborating with and empowering a community to solve their own problems, I believe that kids all over the world can bring sustainable, systemic change to pass.

***In Jessica's own words:***

"Days in Kibera, Africa's largest slum, have a frenzied pace. It's as if I can feel the intense daily struggles of Kibera's 1.5

million residents to simply survive. Working here for the past three years, I've learned to take nothing for granted: education, health or the knowledge that dreams can come true.

"Yet even here miracles happen. Aug. 18, 2009, was one such day: the day we dedicated the Kibera School for Girls, demonstrating a collective belief in the power of hope.

"The 45 students in our first three classes arrived at 8 a.m. in their freshly pressed uniforms — the very first new clothing any of our girls had ever owned. It was obvious that our children and parents had never been to an event celebrating them.

"When I arrived at the school, we found the parents and children singing. One mother stood in the center leading a call-and-response song. She lifted her voice in praise singing the lyrics, *That's why we love you God, when we think there is no hope you prove us wrong. When we search for death you give us life. That's why we love you, you show us that there is a brighter day, a day of peace, a second chance, you teach us to keep singing songs of hope.*

"Everyone, everywhere, deserves a chance to hope."

**Mark Rembert, 25, Energize Clinton County**

*Tell us about your cause or organization.*

At Energize Clinton County we (me and

my partner, Taylor Stuckert) are working toward the simple goal of making our hometown a vibrant place in the world, while demonstrating a new vision of possibility for small towns and rural places across America.

We have assisted the City of Wilmington, Ohio, in developing and adopting a local green development plan in the form of the country's first Green Enterprise Zone. This effort helped to secure more than \$1.3 million in grants to fund three renewable energy projects and has attracted the attention of renewable energy companies from across the world.

We've worked with local business owners to build the Buy Local First Clinton County campaign, a marketing and outreach campaign aimed at keeping dollars and jobs in our local economy by promoting local businesses. And we've helped to grow the local food economy in Clinton County by helping local farmers market themselves and take advantage of new technologies.

*Who or what inspired you to do something?*

Our work began with a call to serve our hometown at a time of crisis. In May 2008, DHL announced that it would be closing its U.S. shipping hub at the Wilmington Air Park. Since then, more than 8,000 people have lost their jobs, and Clinton County now has the highest unemployment in the state of Ohio.

Although we had left Wilmington after

high school without plans to return, the thought of losing the most important place we'd ever called home brought us back to stay and serve.

*Other than donating money, what can people do to help your cause?*

One of the biggest issues we've encountered in helping small towns revitalize themselves is that small cities and towns aren't very connected. However, with advancements in technology and the Internet, rural America now has opportunities to collaborate and connect with other communities.

The most important thing rural communities and small towns can do is share ideas, experiences and what works. If you're trying to get new ideas off the ground in your community, let us know how we can help.

If you're not from a small town, then go visit one!

*How do you stay motivated and inspired?*

One of the best things about working in our hometown is that the people we serve are more than just a "target population"; they're friends and neighbors. We are working to improve the quality of life in our community for the simple reason that we love living here and want to make it better. We've been especially inspired and motivated by the young people, who, like ourselves, have come home. If you live, or have lived, in a small town, you'll know that active young professionals are

a rare commodity. It is truly inspiring to work with other young people who make sacrifices to work in a place like Wilmington and who share our passion for serving the community.

*What advice would you give other young people who want to do something?*

Work on problems that are close to home. We encourage young people to look for inspiration in the things that make your community special: history, local culture and traditions, the natural landscape and environment, unique local businesses. Tapping into the energy of your community is the best starting point for getting an idea off the ground.

In short: Stay put and start a revolution.

***In Mark's own words:***

"Through our work we have been greatly moved by the continual deterioration of our small, rural communities across America. Our paths have taken us from Wilmington to big city lives in Philadelphia and New York and back again.

Throughout the journey we've come to a much deeper appreciation for the unique experience of small-town life.

"We want to dispel the myth that areas that value more humble, community-focused lifestyles lack creativity, innovation or a desirable quality of life. We have experienced the exact opposite and have found that new ideas can take form and grow very quickly in tight-knit communities that are experienced in

working together. “Rural places are home to 19 percent of the U.S. population and 21 percent of its poor. Young people are especially affected in rural places. For example, children in rural places are more likely to live in poverty than children in urban areas, and rural men and women disproportionately comprise 44 percent of the U.S. military. Yet, rural places receive less than 7 percent of all grants distributed by the top 1,000 U.S. foundations; less than 2 percent of all philanthropic grants made by Fortune 500 companies; and receive less per capita in federal government funding than urban areas. “If we are to preserve our country’s small towns and rural places, and address the serious social, economic and health crises facing our rural communities, we must begin to change our perception and begin re-investing in rural America.”

**Jacqueline Murekatete, 25,  
Jacqueline’s Human Rights Corner**

*Tell us about your cause or organization.*

Established in 2007, Jacqueline’s Human Rights Corner is a genocide prevention program under the umbrella of Miracle Corners of the World. The initiative is motivated by a commitment to prevent future genocide and to help genocide survivors rebuild their lives and their country.

The program has two main tracks: First, we aim to educate people around the world about the crime of genocide through a number of activities, particularly

by giving presentations (telling my story of surviving the 1994 genocide in Rwanda).

This year, I hope to develop a genocide-prevention education kit for high school students that teachers can use to reinforce the importance of fighting hate, racism, discrimination and indifference, and taking action.

Second, we aim to empower genocide survivors to rebuild their lives and their country by establishing community centers that offer a variety of services, including entrepreneurship, language training, computer courses, performing arts, trauma counseling and a microfinance initiative. Expected to open this August, our first center will provide services to genocide survivors who work at the center and who live in the surrounding community.

*Who or what inspired you to do something?*

When I was 9, my native country of Rwanda was destroyed by one of the worst genocides in history. Among the million Tutsis massacred during the 100-day genocide in 1994 were most of my extended family and friends. Unlike thousands of genocide victims, I was fortunate to have an uncle in the United States who brought me here to start a new life.

When I was a sophomore in high school, Holocaust survivor David Gewirtzman came to my English class to share his personal story of surviving the Holocaust.

Seeing similarities between our two experiences, David invited me to start speaking with him and fighting genocides around the world. Speaking with David made me realize that sharing my story can actually make a difference in people's lives.

*Other than donating money, what can people do to help your cause?*

People young and old can get involved in our organization by volunteering their time at our New York City office; volunteering their time at our community center in Rwanda; lending their expertise and educational background to our genocide-prevention programs in New York or Rwanda; or by organizing an event and inviting me or one of my colleagues to speak to their community about our work.

*How do you stay motivated and inspired?*

My fellow genocide survivors' strength and determination to live and rebuild their lives, despite the horrors that they experienced and the loss they suffered, inspire me to continue to the work that I do. The support and encouragement I receive from the various individuals and organizations who support my work shows me that people do care about eradicating the crime of genocide and that they care about the plight of survivors.

*What advice would you give other young people who want to do something?*

My advice to young people would be first to identify a cause that they are passionate about and then dedicate part

of their life to advancing that cause. Recognize that you are a global citizen with global responsibilities and that life is more meaningful when you live beyond yourself, when you know that someone else's life is better because you exist.

***In Jacqueline's own words:***

"After struggling with the loss that came with losing my parents, six siblings, most of my extended family and friends to the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, I made a decision to do all I can to make sure that no other person would ever have to experience the horrors that I experienced. Since then, I have traveled far and wide and shared my experience as a survivor and run educational workshops to fight discrimination, hate and racism in schools, churches, synagogues and other educational centers.

"I know that my work is making a difference when I read the dozens of letters that I receive annually from high school and college students telling me about the different initiatives they have started in their schools and communities to fight racism, discrimination, hate and other elements of genocide. On an international and policy level, I know that my work is making a difference when I receive requests for Jacqueline's Human Rights Corner to participate in various U.N conferences and workshops.

"In my program's efforts to help genocide survivors, I realized that we are making a positive impact in survivors' lives when I receive e-mails from fellow survivors in

Rwanda telling me how they have already began to benefit from the community center that we just finished building. Because of the center's programs, which include IT education, entrepreneurship training, media and arts, trauma counseling, and a microfinance initiative, survivors in Rwanda will be able to get educational and employment opportunities that they would not get were it not for my program's efforts."