

Gov. Bob McDonnell speaks with Lt. Col. Mario Beckles and his wife Angela at the ThanksUSA fundraiser in McLean Feb. 21. The charity, founded by two local girls in 2005, provides scholarships for children and spouses of military families.

OPINION, PAGE 8 ♦ ENTERTAINMENT, PAGE 14 ♦ SPORTS, PAGE 16 ♦ CLASSIFIEDS, PAGE 18

PHOTO BY ALEX McVEIGH/THE CONNECTION

# Thanking Military Families

NEWS, PAGE 6

## Voice of McLean's Business Community

NEWS, PAGE 4

## Fit on Elm Street

NEWS, PAGE 13

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## NEWS



From left, Rachel, 15, and Kelsi Okun, 12, thank a crowd of almost 100 people for attending the ThanksUSA fundraiser Feb. 21. Rachel and Kelsi started the foundation in 2005, with the help of their parents, after seeing the financial struggles of their neighbor, a lieutenant colonel in the Army.

## Thanking Military Families

### ThanksUSA holds fundraiser for military family scholarships.

BY ALEX McVEIGH  
THE CONNECTION

It takes most people well into adulthood to make a difference in the world. Rachel, 15, and Kelsi Okun, 12, of McLean, found a way to start helping six years ago. It was then when their next-door neighbor, a lieutenant colonel in the army, and his family were struggling financially that an idea was born.

"After his coming home and struggling with an injury, we realized we had to do something," Rachel Okun said. "We wanted people to realize that as long as these conflicts are stretching on, we can't forget what men and women in the armed forces are

doing for us."

With the help of their parents, the girls founded ThanksUSA, which is based in McLean and has given away more than \$6 million in scholarships since its founding in 2005. The 2,200 scholarships given away have gone to spouses and children of military families.

ThanksUSA hosted a fundraiser at a local residence Feb. 21, which featured a performance by world-renowned Irish tenor Anthony Kearns and was attended by Virginia Gov. Bob McDonnell and close to 100 other supporters.

Chris Simmons, a managing partner with PriceWaterhouseCoopers, hosted the event at his house, and

SEE THANKSUSA, PAGE 7

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Anthony Kearns, a member of the Irish Tenors, performs at a fundraiser for ThanksUSA in McLean Feb. 21.



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# ThanksUSA Holds Fundraiser in McLean

FROM PAGE 6

said when he heard about ThanksUSA's mission, deciding to host was a no-brainer.

"When I heard about their focus on providing assistance to active duty military, I knew it was something we had to support," Simmons said. "Even though the governor is here, it's not a politi-

cal event, it's just people coming together to support the people that matter the most."

McDonnell said it was a good sign for the future that two young people are able to make such a difference for so many people.

"At such a tender age they understand just how important it is to support our military," he said. "They give families the comfort of

knowing there is a helping hand."

Kearns, who is a founding member of the Irish Tenors group, performed renditions of traditional Irish songs in the ballroom.

"I don't take lightly the opportunity to help with events like this," said Kearns, who has performed at other ThanksUSA fundraisers.

With so many people in atten-

dance who stayed for the concert, but also to support the cause, Kelsi Okun said it was heart-warming to see people support what they are trying to do.

"It's incredible to know that this small idea has become an incredible organization, and that what we do can touch so many lives of people who truly deserve it," she said.

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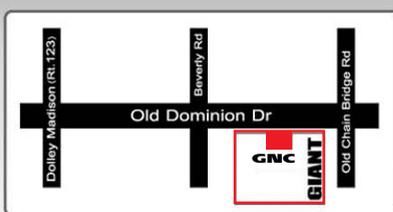
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