

DCMA Virginia Administers

ThanksUSA Grant



by Mr. Chris Carlin, DCMA Virginia

Christmas arrived a little early this year for the families of more than 1,000 active-duty military personnel. They will receive scholarships for postsecondary education as a result of a \$3.9 million grant to a nonprofit organization, ThanksUSA, that developed from an idea by two Virginia school children, Rachel and Kelsi Okun, ages 10 and eight years old.

In the fall of 2005, the Okuns approached their teacher with an idea to start an Internet-based treasure hunt that quizzes players on their knowledge

of history, culture, geography and trivia relating to each U.S. state. Every participant would be encouraged to make a contribution to the ThanksUSA scholarship fund, and prizes would be donated. The response to this grassroots effort to provide for military families has included corporate and private donations of overseas trips, jewelry from Adeler Jewelers and tickets to the 2007 Super Bowl.

As the effort grew, a private, nonprofit educational consulting firm was engaged to screen candidates and to oversee the scholarships. This organization, among others, participates virtually at cost according to spokeswoman Ms. Jeri Thomson. In an attempt to better fund the campaign, the group submitted a grant application to the Army Contracting Agency. Unfortunately, they had no prior procurement field

expertise. When ThanksUSA won a \$3.9 million one-year grant, they had to negotiate the government billing and payment process for the first time.

DCMA Virginia Administrative Contracting Officer Ms. Linda Rowe received a delegation to administer the grant and was faced with an immediate need to expedite an initial payment for scholarship commitments for the fall semester. Several weeks of feverish activity ensued as the grantees learned while doing.

At present, 1,013 scholarships to children and spouses of active-duty service members from all U.S. military services and all 50 states have been awarded. The largely volunteer staff is continuing its efforts to expand the program and hosted its first annual gala on Nov. 14.

The program staff can be reached via their Web site at <http://www.thanksusa.org>.

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(Above) From left, sitting: sisters Rachel and Kelsi Okun with Ms. Campbell Brown and Mr. Lester Holt of NBC News' "Weekend Today"; standing: Mr. Jorge Adeler of Adeler Jewelers.