



It was possibly the best visit to the dentist ever, at least for Harris Stone.

“No cavities,” she said.

But there’s more. While the Savannah Country Day eighth-grader was getting her teeth cleaned on May 14, her mother got a call from the school’s athletic director, Jim Collis.

Harris was a winner of the [third annual DeWitt Awards](#) for Chatham County’s top eighth-grade public and private school student-athletes. Her mother told her when they got in the car.

“(Collis) said that I’d won, and I didn’t even know I was nominated,” Harris said Thursday following the awards presentation at the Forsyth Park fountain.

Eighth-graders are nominated by their coaches, principals and athletic directors based on academic and athletic achievements as well as exemplary character shown through sportsmanship and community service.

Stone was the selection for private school girls after excelling in soccer, basketball and volleyball. She has averaged a 94.5 grade or higher through every quarter of middle school, and she volunteers for youth camps at the Savannah Yacht Club, at her church and at United Ministries of Savannah’s [Emmaus House](#), a soup kitchen that feeds the homeless.

The other winners were Ava Thomas of the STEM Academy at Barlett (public school girls); Makai Joyner of Hubert Middle School (public school boys); and Harry “Zo” Smalls Jr. of Savannah Christian and John Lilly of Blessed Sacrament (private school boys).

David DeWitt came up with the idea for the awards four years ago when he was coaching boys basketball. He knew his own players best and loved his teams, but he also respected the opposing teams’ efforts. He felt there was a void in recognizing the accomplishments of this pre-high school class of student-athletes.

“The kids are very impressive in the way they go about their business,” said DeWitt, who presents the awards with his wife Elizabeth. “I think this generation gets a bad rap as being all Xbox and all about themselves. They’re really good kids. So what we’ve tried to do is encourage these 13- and 14-year-olds to keep doing it the right way — the total package: community service, good grades and keep doing it on the field.

“These are the best of the best,” he added.

Determining the subjective “best,” is no easy task for a committee of six, and there have been ties for awards.

“All of them were so respected and spoken of so highly by their athletic directors,” DeWitt said of the 2021 winners. “The principals have to check on them as far as their character goes, but their character distinguished themselves. And they were the top in their field.”

The awards are presented by the Exchange Club of Savannah and sponsored by Friday Health Plans. DeWitt is a health insurance broker whose sports background includes lettering in 1990 at the University of Georgia when coach Hugh Durham’s men’s basketball team won the Southeastern Conference title.

The Exchange Club is also awarding the Grainer Nissan Teacher of the Year to Savannah Arts Academy principal Gif Lockley on Monday, May 24.

Surprise, surprise

The eighth-graders, like Stone, didn’t find out until a few days before the presentation of a trophy and a gift certificate from Dick’s Sporting Goods.

“I knew of the award and I knew the kids who won it last year, but I wasn’t really thinking about it this year,” said Lilly, 14. “It caught me by surprise.”

He’s 6-foot-3 in his bare feet and starred on Blessed Sacrament basketball teams that won Savannah Parochial Athletic League titles in sixth, seventh and eighth grade. The grandson of Tommy Cannon, who coached Benedictine basketball for 38 season, Lilly also played football, baseball and did long jump and high jump on the track and field team.

He could join a stacked quarterback room this fall at Benedictine, where rising senior Holden Geriner is a blue-chipper already committed to Auburn, and rising sophomore Luke Kromenhoek is a rising star.

“I’m open to anything. I will sit behind Luke Kromenhoek three years if that’s what it takes,” Lilly said.

He’s a team player, and that includes when the 4.0 GPA-student tutors fellow students in mathematics at Blessed Sacrament, and when he volunteered for Summer Angels, a Meals on Wheels serving senior citizens.

“It was just a really fun experience to help around the community,” he said of the summer of 2019, pre-pandemic. “They had like a big, ol’ van and we all piled in there. We were handing out meals after walking up to the doors.”

The 6-2 Joyner is making a name for himself in basketball, as he averaged 29.7 points a game as MVP of the Savannah High junior varsity.

“I just play every game how I do,” said the soft-spoken teen. “I just be myself.”

He also serves the community through the Salvation Army and by coaching at Jenkins Athletic Club.

Smalls starred in football for the SPAL championship team at SCPS as a running back and linebacker, as well as in track and basketball.

He volunteers with the Frank Callen Boys & Girls Club and its Triple Play program that teaches youth to eat healthy, keep fit and form positive relationships.

He said what he enjoys most is “probably community service because I get to help others that are not fortunate to have money and don’t really have homes.”

His goal is to be an NFL running back and give back to the community.

Thomas didn’t know she was receiving the award but got tipped off when she got to school and saw posters with her face on it. The future Savannah Arts freshman plays basketball, soccer and track while sporting a 92 GPA and volunteers at Ronald McDonald House and the Curtis & Elizabeth Anderson Cancer Institute as well as serving as president of the Tybee Youth Council.

They are students, athletes and community servants. It’s makes one wonder where they find the time. DeWitt brought up an old saying.

“If you want somebody to do something, you ask a busy person,” he said. “A busy person gets things done.”

DeWitt also said that the awards are about recognizing excellence beyond sports and academics, to encourage leadership and citizenship. So add five more members to the DeWitt Awards’ exclusive club, and look forward to the great leaders and citizens they could be in the future.

More 2021 nominees

Bethesda Academy — Zayden Edwards

Blessed Sacrament — Thomas Blackshear, Lillie Coffey, Alexis Spisso

Calvary Day — Cutter Powell, Marque Williams, Caleb Jones, Kaylee Jeffcoact

Georgetown — Cameron Smalls

Hancock Day — Jack Deen, Vladimir Kapitan, Sadie Albert, Feriby McCorkle

St. James — Addie Yates

Savannah Christian — Mary Elizabeth Edenfield

Savannah Country Day — Jackson Day

STEM — Hudson Zaragoza

Previous winners

2020 — Ernajah Mallard, Hubert Middle School (public school girls); Mary Sophia Fischer, Blessed Sacrament (private school girls); Makai Hampton, Southwest Middle School (public school boys); and Jake Merklinger, Calvary Day, and Luke Kromenhoek, St. James (private school boys).

2019 — Margaret Wade, STEM Academy at Bartlett (public school girls); Anna Pollak, Savannah Country Day (private school girls); Kaden Tuten, STEM Academy (public school boys); Conner Graham, Hancock Day (private school boys).

For more on the winners and nominees, go to savathleteofyear.com.

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