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3 receive gifts in Ricky Sparks' honor

Vocational Solutions clients, employees benefit

By John Harbin
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Mike Dirks/Times-News
Allen Combs, far left, and Don Jones, far right, both with the Henderson County Education Foundation along with Brenda Sparks McCleerey, middle in red, present Laura Cooke, second from left, and Kathy Kaap, second from right, with $500 scholarships each as part of the Ricky Sparks Memorial Scholarship Award during a ceremony at Vocational Solutions.

The family of Ricky Sparks honored his memory Monday afternoon by awarding the first Ricky Sparks Memorial Scholarship Award at Vocational Solutions.

Ricky and his mother, Connie, were murdered in November 2007. The two men responsible, Charles Collins and Justin Graham, pleaded guilty to charges of first-degree murder and have both been sentenced to spend the rest of their lives in prison.

"The family of Ricky Sparks, through Henderson County Education Foundation, is awarding the first annual Ricky Sparks Memorial Scholarship at Vocational Solutions in honor of Sparks' long and positive employment at Vocational Solutions," Joe White, Vocational Solutions executive director, said Monday. "The award is offered for employees or their immediate families to pursue education to enhance employability and for clients to enhance their quality of life. Three individuals will receive $500 each."

Vocational Solutions has been providing vocational training and employment for adults with disabilities in Henderson County since 1967.

The award recipients this year are Kathy Kaap, Laura Cooke and Shania Wise.

"Because Rick was here for so long, we wanted to honor Vocational Solutions," said Sparks' sister, Brenda Sparks McCleerey. "This was a small way of thanking them for being a part of our family."

Kaap will use her Ricky Sparks Memorial Scholarship Award for therapeutic horseback riding to enhance her quality of life.

"I was very excited and overwhelmed, knowing that they cared," Kaap said when she found out she was a recipient. "(This will) help my walk and my leg muscles. It gives me good therapy for my whole body. It would make me happy to be back on a horse with other people who are handicapped ... makes me realize I can still do things I love even though I am handicapped and in a wheelchair."

Cooke, an employee of Vocational Solutions, will use her scholarship award to enroll in courses at Blue Ridge Community College with the goal of earning a degree in nursing.

"It has always been my passion to pursue a nursing career in which I can give back to

the community; not just through medicine, but with a caring heart and personality," she said. "It is an honor for me to represent the memory of Ricky Sparks through this scholarship."

Wise, a daughter of Vocational Solutions employee Hope Prather, will use her scholarship award to take courses at Western Carolina University in criminal justice.

"I was chosen to attend the National Leadership Forum for National Security," she said. "There, I have learned that my true calling was in law enforcement. I got to tour the Secret Service building and meet some Secret Service agents. When I got back, I decided that what I truly wanted to do with my life is become a special agent."

Anyone wishing to donate to the Ricky Sparks Memorial Scholarship Award can contact Don Jones, executive director of the Henderson County Education Foundation Center, at 800-793-HCEF (4233) or 828-698-8884.

For more information about the programs of Vocational Solutions, please call 696-0361 or 696-0356.

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