

South Bend Tribune

Youth Making a Difference: Rima Bahradine-Bell wins Midwest Youth of the Year



Rose Androwich
South Bend Tribune
August 18, 2024



SOUTH BEND - It's been a busy spring and summer for Rima Bahradine-Bell.

But that's typical of life for the 17-year-old from South Bend, who was named the Indiana Youth of the Year on April 12 by the national Boys and Girls Club of America organization.

Then, she won the Midwest Youth of the Year title on June 27 at the Midwest Regional Competition in Chicago.

After that, Rima went to Washington, D.C., where she met with congressional representatives and senate staff members in July to talk about gun violence as a member of The Boys & Girls Club of the Northern Indiana Corridor's Think, Learn, Create Change program.

When she and her group spoke with legislators, they pointed out that a lot of current resources, such as grief therapy, are reactive, not preventive. One measure they proposed is to get more people involved in the club and off the streets.

"I think every person has had an experience where they hear about something that's related to the topic or sees it around, and it's sad that we have to," she said.

For Rima, though, her family has experienced gun violence firsthand: When she was 2, her 22-year-old brother, Phillip Bell, died after he was shot multiple times while walking home on Oct. 21, 2009.

A prayer vigil was held in Phillip's honor a block away from where he was killed. His mother, Heidi Sunji-Bell, spoke about her son's death and how she told her children that Phillip was with their grandmother now.

"My children are my life," Sunji-Bell said in a previous Tribune article. "When someone takes a part of that away, your life crumbles."

Rima said she doesn't remember much about Phillip because she was so young when he died, but his death does motivate some of her actions, including talking to congressional legislators about gun violence.

"I think it was more seeing the effect on my family and those around me that inspires me," she said. "... Seeing that, the effects that such a tragic event had with the people in my life and to know that's happening to so many other people in the world, it's inspiring to try and stop that from reoccurring."

A robotics leader

Rima first joined the Boys and Girls Club when she was in kindergarten and stayed in the club for a few years, until she started attending a school that didn't have the program.

She would eventually come back her freshman year of high school, when she started attending Career Academy, a charter school specializing in STEM and project-based learning.

By the time she graduates, Rima said, she will have an associate's degree, and she plans to go on to become an orthodontist. However, attending the TLC program sparked a new, recent interest in politics.

Dave Ebersol, a teacher and robotics coach at Career Academy, encouraged Rima to join the school's robotics team.

"I learned how to work a lot of different machines," Rima said. "I weld, I program, I know how to use a drill, which I did not know before I joined the team. ... I've learned communication. I've learned how to talk people, how to work in a more professional setting, how to navigate outreach and really make things that I'm passionate about a real thing."

There are two types of students, Ebersol said, who join the team: students who are great for the team and students who the team is great for. He considers Rima to be someone who is great for the team.

"It's a gravitational pull with her that she knows what she wants and what she wants the organization or her future to look like," he said. "Everyone just kind of attaches to it and then moves forward together in this positive light. I think the best analogy I can make for Rima is she's like a lighthouse. She's a beacon for bettering everybody around her."

This year, the Career Academy robotics team won the Impact Award from FIRST (For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology). The award recognizes teams that other teams should emulate in their advancement of "transforming the culture in ways that will inspire greater levels of respect and honor for science and technology."

That, along with the robot the team built, earned the students an invitation to the FIRST World Championship in Houston in April.



Rima Bahradine-Bell, right, laughs with her robotics team's coach Dave Ebersol in the Future Lab at the Boys & Girls Club of the Northern Indiana Corridor's Teen Center on Monday, July 22, 2024, in South Bend. MICHAEL CLUBB/SOUTH BEND TRIBUNE

"We ended up winning the Impact Award for the first time," Ebersol said. "We've been going after this award for six years, (then) her team won it as sophomores."

When Ebersol set out to create a maker space at the Boys and Girls Club, Rima decided to help because she wanted a space for kids to be designed by kids. Ebersol served as a consultant for the maker space, known as the RV There Yet? Great Futures Inventor Center, a mobile RV equipped with \$82,000 worth of equipment that travels to 25 club sites.

Seeing the kids in the maker space is "kind of like magic" for her.

"I love seeing all the little kids get so excited over it," Rima said. "I've been in there a couple of times, and you just see their little faces light up because they've never seen anything like that."

Political advocacy

Before this summer, Rima had previously visited Washington, D.C., to lobby legislators for more money for the Boys and Girls Club of America, as well as the Indiana Statehouse to advocate on behalf of robotics in the state.

"You find that a lot of the people in our government, they actually want to hear what you have to say," she said. "Really because that's how they work. If you don't know what the people want, how are you supposed to actually run and make it a place that the people want?"

Jacqueline Kronk, the CEO of the club, said Rima is a shining example of what the club is all about.

"Using her voice in terms of advocacy and whether it's a statehouse or in D.C. with our legislators there, I find it resonates so much more when you're hearing it from one of our youth who has experienced it as a key stakeholder in what we do," Kronk said. "To have her at that table, to articulate what that experience has been like and the impact that it's had on her is a huge value-add for us."

Rima loves the family aspect of the club. She added that the club puts in the work to show the kids who become involved that they are important.

She also visited the Indiana Statehouse to advocate for HB 1382, a bill passed by the General Assembly and signed into law by Gov. Eric Holcomb that students from the FireWires robotics team at Osceola's GEARS helped to write. The bill provides \$4 million dollars in funding to robotics teams across Indiana.

The club encouraged Rima to get involved with Leadership South Bend Mishawaka's youth program, a program that teaches students about different aspects of servant leadership. She was paired with a local nonprofit called Hope for the Hungry.

She said the organization provides not only food for the hungry but also education on generational poverty and how to make food at home. The education surrounds the issue happening in the South Bend community and around the world, according to her.



Rima Bahradine-Bell poses for a portrait at the Boys & Girls Club of the Northern Indiana Corridor's Teen Center on Monday, July 22, 2024, in South Bend. MICHAEL CLUBB/SOUTH BEND TRIBUNE

Winning Indiana Youth of the Year

Rima was nominated last year for Indiana Youth of the Year, but she didn't receive the award. As they were leaving, she turned to Kronk and told her with confidence, "I know what it takes to win, so I'll come back and win it next year."

Although she said she was half joking when she told Kronk her plans to win, she was inspired to put more work into winning the next year. It paid off, of course, and with her win this year, she also became the first Indiana Youth of the Year to come from St. Joseph County.

"I was so unbelievably proud of her and what she's overcome," Kronk said. "It was easily the greatest moment that I've had as in my tenure as CEO to see someone acknowledged in that" forum.

"I think it was very inspiring and kind of eye-opening," Rima said about the Midwest competition. "I went there, and I knew I was going to meet so many impressive youth from all over America and the Midwest."

After winning the Midwest Youth of the Year competition, she now advances to the national round, where she will compete on Sept. 18.

"It's like a mix of nervousness and excitement," Rima said. "I just know that I'm going to meet so many just amazing people."

Contact Tribune staff writer Rose Androwich at randrowich@gannett.com.