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CIRCLE OF FRIENDS: Mrs. Chana Teldon, Director of The Friendship Circle, stands at the podium as she presents 22 local teens with the Friendship Circle Leadership Award. The teens are honored for the devotion, volunteerism and kindness that they displayed over the last year.

Lending a hand to special friends

By DANA FELSER

Twenty-two teen volunteers have dedicated themselves to helping children with special needs through The Friendship Circle. They were honored with the Friendship Circle Leadership Award on Thursday, May 31. The Award was officially signed by U.S. Congressman Steve Israel, Suffolk County Executive Steve Levy, New York State Assemblymen Michael Fitzpatrick and Andrew Raia, who recognized the devotion of the teens.

"We presented the award to the teens we felt gave it their most this year," said Rabbi Zalman Teldon, Director of the Friendship Circle. "They are truly amazing, and without them this organization wouldn't be anything. They did a wonderful job."

The teens ranged in age from eighth-graders to twelfth-graders and represented Hauppauge, Commack, East Northport and Kings Park middle and high schools. The celebration took place at Mr.

Teen volunteers recognized for forging relationships with kids who have special needs

and Mrs. Andrew and Wendy Glick's residence in East Northport.

"The Glicks have been helpful from the beginning with The Friendship Circle," said Rabbi Teldon. "They offered their home for an evening of celebration and entertainment."

The Friendship Circle is an international organization that is operated by its local Chabad Lubavitch Center. The group matches local teenagers with children with special needs to build a friendship that is beneficial to both parties.

"Special needs children are unfortunately isolated in society and it makes it difficult on families and themselves," Rabbi Teldon said. "By introducing them to peers, they are able to grow and thrive and get a sense of community and friendship."

Not only do the special needs children gain from the experience, but the volunteer teens also grow and learn from the friendship.

"I've become so much more sensitive to kids with special needs through the Friendship Circle," said volunteer Ben Solaski, of Hauppauge. "I learned how to work with them better and how help them to function on a higher level. It's a really great program that helps everyone—the parents, the kids, the volunteers. Everyone grows and makes a new friend."

Through The Friendship Circle, local teens can grow into mature and compassionate individuals while special needs children make a truly appreciated friend.