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Pine River Institute is finalist in 2024 Defender Services Awards

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LOCAL JOURNALISM INITIATIVE REPORTER

Pine River Institute is another step closer to its goal of winning the 2024 Defender Services Awards.

The local organization provided an update to the Free Press on Friday (Oct. 25), noting that they are now one of two remaining finalists in the Outdoor Accessibility and Education Awards category. The winner of the category will take the grand prize ? a 130 Defender vehicle and $25,000 USD.

?We're so pleasantly surprised; we didn't expect to get this far,? said Heather Kelly, communications director at Pine River Institute.

The Defender Service Awards are an annual initiative that looks to recognize charitable organizations. The awards include five categories that reflect the Defender brand's commitment to bringing a positive impact to the community through acts of service and humanitarian efforts around the world.

This year, the initiative will be awarding six customized Defender 130 vehicles to six charitable organizations in the U.S., Puerto Rico and Canada. The organizations that are selected support the communities they reside in with charitable work every day. The category sponsors will also be awarding $25,000 USD to each of the six winners.

In September, Pine River Institute was announced as a finalist in the Outdoor Accessibility and Education Awards category, which focuses on supporting people who can benefit from the outdoors.

?Our category is about the value of getting outside and for us at Pine River, that is certainly a big part of what we do with the students,? said Kelly.

The Pine River Institute looks to help adolescents struggling with addictive behaviours as well as mental health challenges, and regain control of their lives through their programming. The Pine River Institute has a four-phase program for youth and their families that starts with a six to eight-week-long Outdoor Leadership Experience in Algonquin.

According to Pine River Institute, there are more than 100 teens and families on their waitlist, which they typically stay on for anywhere from six months to one year.

In order to help operate their program, Pine River Institute utilizes a fleet of eight vehicles. The organization has two vehicles up north at their Outdoor Leadership Experience, one in Orilla at their transition house and five on the main campus in Mulmur.

Dan Ardis, Pine River's, senior director of operations and campus life, spoke with the Free Press in October about the impact winning the vehicle would have for the organization.

?Our students and staff are in the wilderness 365 days a year, through all seasons so we're hard on our vehicles ? they are also one of our most expensive costs so a new vehicle would really help us a lot,? he said. ?It's important to note that there are not many vehicles on the market that have passenger capacity and capabilities that we need, with offroad, and trailering as well. We need a vehicle that can pull a heavy trailer of snowmobiles and gear, with 4WD, enough room for passengers, and stand up to a great deal of wear and tear.?

Dufferin County residents have been a significant factor in Pine River Institute's achievement of being a finalist in the 2024 Defender Services Awards. The contest is based on a voting system, and local residents cast their ballots in support of Pine River

Institute until the Oct. 17 deadline.

?It really speaks to the power of community because we wouldn't be where we are, if people didn't vote. We're really pleased that it has created a space for people to rally around what Pine River does and more broadly, the needs of youth mental health and addition. It's already a win for us,? said Kelly.

The winners of each category of the 2024 Defender Services Awards will be announced at Destination Defender in California on Nov. 23.