

Barton honoured by Board with Celebrating Student Success award



By Brock Weir

His clear, booming voice has made him a natural at the morning announcement, and his gregarious personality has made him a familiar face in the halls, and now Andrew Barton, a student at Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School has been recognized for his achievements by the York Region District School Board.

Mr. Barton, 19, is now in his fifth year at Williams' Autism Community Class.

One of the class's founding students, he hit Grade 9 running, establishing himself as a regular and enthusiastic volunteer in the many programs and clubs Williams has to offer.

“Andrew is a dedicated, life-long learner,” said teacher Debbie Wilmhurst in her nomination letter to the Board. “He continually strives to learn new skills, demonstrating initiative and leadership through his music, athletic talents and involvement in the school and community. Andrew has built strong, positive relationships with students, staff and community members through his participation in classes, clubs and school and community music performance.”

Over the years, Andrew has taken it upon himself to learn the acoustic guitar, teaching himself through listening and watching videos, and taking his talents to in-school assemblies, accompanied by his classmates, at lunchtime coffee house music events, and more.

“Andrew has an amazing skill of engaging his audiences and bringing joy to a roomful of people,” said Ms. Wilmhurst.

Speaking to The Auroran last week, Andrew said he was thrilled to receive the honour.

“It makes me feel super proud and happy,” he said. “I wanted to show my family I am very happy. I think everyone around the school knows I am a great volunteer and the best thing about volunteering is just growing up to be a good person.”

Ms. Wilmhurst was approached to nominate Andrew by Williams Principal Christopher Hillmer and fellow teacher Mark Fuller, who works with Andrew on the Peer Mentor program.

“I thought it was a wonderful idea and fully supported it and prepared the nomination,” she said “Together, over the past five years, we felt Andrew has demonstrated consistent initiative, positive outlook, and he is just involved and very enthusiastic. He is involved in so many activities in the school and in the community. We just thought he was a great candidate. He brings happiness to everyone he talks to. He recognizes people by name, always has a polite, friendly greeting, always with happy exchanges. He wants to be part of everything that is happening, whether it is the Best Buddies program or Peer Mentors.

“Peer Mentors is a specialized group here at our school you have to interview for and prepare and attend things on evenings and weekends. He prepared diligently for that, went through the interview process, and was selected. Whenever there is a concert or assembly, performance happening, posters to join this, Andrew volunteers and wants to be a part of that and I support all the students in the class in whatever their interests are.”

Andrew was one of the first students to enrol in the school's Autism Community Classroom five years ago, and it was established as a core program offering math, English, science, geography, art and gym, along with social skills.

?On top of all that and included in all of that is work experience,? said Ms. Wilmhurst. ?Andrew began working here in the cafeteria, he progressed and spent two years at Winners and is now working at a local veterinary clinic. Involved in all of that is transit training, so we take the VIVA, the YRT, the GO Bus and the GO train. They have learned how to do all that and then the program is individualized to each student's learning style and their interests.?

Williams now has three Community Classrooms in addition to autism, including a classroom focused on students with developmental disabilities and students with mild intellectual disabilities.

?Together, I just think it is a real, great, strong community,? said Ms. Wilmhurst. ?The school itself has a very inclusive, welcoming atmosphere where all our students feel accepted and happy. For this job, it requires a great relationship with the students, the families and our school community and just watching the students grow and feel more comfortable and confident in themselves each year is special. Their enthusiasm for life keeps all of us growing.?