

Give Back Award students are redefining what's possible?



By Brock Weir

When Gareth Price came out to his family at the end of Grade 8, the Aurora teen was lucky to be a part of a loving, welcoming family environment free of the stigma so many LGBTQ+ youngsters are afraid of during their time of self-discovery. But, the Cardinal Carter recognized that many of his peers aren't so lucky and set out to be that helping hand to those who are struggling within his school community.

Gareth was one of 20 students from Aurora, Newmarket, and King recognized last Thursday night as the recipients of the 2017 Give Back Awards.

This scholarship program, founded by Belinda Stronach while serving as MP for Newmarket-Aurora, recognizes area students who go the extra mile to contribute to their school environment and make it a better place. Now administered by Neighbourhood Network, the program provides cash prizes to local graduating students based on their volunteer contributions.

This year's programs recognized students from Aurora High School (Heba Shahaed), Cardinal Carter Catholic High School (Charles Choi, Gareth Price, Ella Wickham), St. Maximilian Kolbe Catholic High School (Kristen Harrington), ESC Renaissance (Alexander Akiki), St. Andrew's College (Eric Asgari, William Deo), Dr. J.M. Denison Secondary School (Quinn Demczuk), Newmarket High School (Ryan Lithgow), Huron Heights Secondary School (Sarah Kennelly), Sir William Mulock Secondary School (Claudia Rupnik, Jordan Wheatle), Sacred Heart Catholic High School (Stephanie Saunders, Michael Unsworth, Kelly Zou), Country Day School (Nili Tonkonog), and Villanova College (Jenny Park, Gabrielle Stefou, Alyssa Yantsis).

"I am really grateful for the Give Back Award," said Price. "I never really expected to get recognition when I started. My parents raised me to know that I was really lucky where I was born and given these chances to have a life and do whatever I wanted. Working within my church and in the community you can see that a lot of people don't get the same opportunities as you and to give back feels like extending that opportunity to everybody.

"I really hope I can keep extending my hand out to other people. I find when you extend your hand to someone else, you can help bring them up and they do the same. If I can help one person up, they can help someone else up and so on through the chain." Knowing he wanted to give back to the Cardinal Carter community, he knew almost immediately how he could contribute. Despite the support he received from his family after coming out, he says he would have liked to have had more support from the wider community.

"I figure if I can extend that hand out, that means other people won't have to go through the same thing I did, especially as I did in a Catholic school where, as in any public school, stigma surrounds the LGBTQ community," says Gareth, who begins studying chemical engineering at McGill University this fall while considering a career in pediatrics. "With recent events that have been occurring, there is really an importance to help those communities in the 21st century."

Recognized by the Give Back Awards committee for his work in the church, at soup kitchens, in community gardens and as a peer mentor, he was also recognized for his campaigns within the school to support LGBTQ youth. In a Catholic school, however, he

says it is important to seek out these youth as the need to 'fit in' can be overwhelming.

'Students who might be struggling with those issues won't find us because they won't really want to admit that they need the help, or they might be worried that if they do come to us they might be singled out in their groups,' he explains, noting they have extended that welcoming hand to Grade 9s just discovering themselves to even Grade 11s who have had to leave home. 'We find that outreach is very important, as well as the opportunity to come to us in a discreet way.'

Aurora High School Student Heba Shahaed also believes extending that helping hand is integral to the community, wherever you happen to be.

'I feel very, very honoured and very, very special' and I think this is just the cherry on top, to be honest,' she says. 'I volunteer and give back to the community so that we can progress as a society and I think it is my responsibility, and I am very honoured to be recognized for that.'

Heba, according to the Give Back Team, holds close to her heart the views of Gustav Nossal, who said, 'Community leadership is the courage, creativity and capacity to inspire participation, development, and sustainability for strong communities.' This has been demonstrated through her work with York Regional Police as their President of Empowering Student partnerships, serving as Peer Mentor Team Coordinator at Aurora High School, spearheading initiatives benefiting the Aurora Food Pantry, Belinda's Place, Yellow Brick House, Free the Children, the Red Cross, and the Aurora Historical Society 'all the while serving on the Town of Aurora's Youth Engagement Committee.

'My inspiration to give back started as I began volunteering in my school and began to see how my help and volunteerism made an impact and helped make a difference in the lives of so many people, so I decided to explore different options to get involved,' says Heba, who plans to start her post-secondary career this fall at either the University of Toronto or McMaster University, with an eye to becoming a doctor. 'I saw how much it affected people. It was something that made me feel really good and made others feel really good, so I decided to continue.

'I want to continue volunteering wherever I go. [At University] I want to continue, whether it is through volunteering at the hospital, or spending time tutoring and helping out my peers, or people living within the community. Anything I can do to help and be a leader in my community is what I would like to do.'

On hand to salute the work of the 20 outstanding students at Magna's Aurora headquarters last week was philanthropist and television personality Joan Walker, who has been internationally recognized for her own humanitarian work.

Ms. Walker told the students they are helping to set the world on a 'stronger, more sustainable path,' which is crucial now more than ever.

'You're the big dreamers,' she said. 'You guys are doing this' for the sole purpose of bettering the lives of other people and that is such a beautiful thing. It is kind of astonishing that you have already figured out how each individual human being on Earth has the power to make change. You guys are young and have chosen to redefine what's possible.'

In the coming weeks, The Auroran will feature individual profiles of our local Give Back recipients.