

Local runners take strides for youth mental health



By Brock Weir

Whether it is anxiety, depression, or even addiction, it is estimated that as many as two million young Canadians are now struggling with a mental health issue.

All too often it is something youth live with in silence, but local teens are looking to help break that stigma one step at a time.

For many students, the summer holidays are a time for rest, relaxation, and maybe a part-time job, but for the CDS Runners, it is a time for training and fundraising as they prepare to take on the RBC Race for Kids.

32 runners ? and counting ? from King's Country Day School (CDS), many of whom are from Aurora, are gearing up for the September 16 race, which benefits the Family Navigation Project at Sunnybrook Hospital.

The CDS Runners initially started out with a fundraising goal of \$1,400 earlier this year, but after quickly surpassing that amount, and their next goal of \$4,000, they've significantly upped the ante ? aiming to collect more than \$25,000 for the organization which aims to provide families the resources they need to navigate the complex world of mental health.

?When we heard that over two million youth in Canada suffer from a form of mental illness, and we saw how the Family Navigation Project at Sunnybrook really helps youth in the Greater Toronto Area and their families overcome mental illness, we decided to take part in the RBC Race for Kids,? says student Kiyam Heybati. ?Not only is it fun for a friend group to take part in and enjoy the day, but it is also to fundraise and raise awareness for the cause.

?As an organization, they did a survey and found out that one in five youth will experience ? or are suffering from ? a form of mental illness right now in our society, but the problem with mental illness today is there is so much stigma and shame surrounding it that even though we have tried so much to improve this, many people decide to go through this on their own. We can see the detrimental and destructive impacts that has had on the lives of youth in our society and that is why this organization wants to change that. The project wants to show, ?You can turn to us for help, we'll navigate your family to get the services that you desperately need and require.?"

Adds fellow student Nicolas Gesualdo, ?Many teens suffer from mental illness, and I have a couple of close friends who do struggle with it. This is a great way to help out and just donate to the cause and see it improve.?"

According to student Kosta Tzani, the growing collective of CDS Runners started out as a handful. Now numbering 32, spanning at least three grades over both Country Day School's Senior and Middle Schools, their ranks also include teachers who were also inspired to join the cause.

Some of the members ? including Kiyam and Shayan Heybati ? are part of CDS' Cross Country team, so they initially pitched the RBC Race for Kids as a fun and beneficial way of training over the summer ahead of their upcoming season.

?But it got much larger than that,? says Kiyam, noting that, once the impacts of the cause began to sink in, he started to change his pitch to the student body. ?We wanted to show how this organization really helps people, showing the testimonials this organization has received, as well as the devastating statistics that not only do over two million suffer from mental illness, but only 20 per cent receive the treatment they require.

?[After we make the pitch] there are honestly no questions regarding the cause because it is just so great and everyone has such a passion for it. It has been great.?

With their \$25,000 fundraising goal set, the team is now fanning out into the local community to help spread awareness as well as passion.

Shayan says they started reaching out to local restaurants including Buffalo Wild Wings, Boston Pizza and David's Team looking for monetary and in-kind donations, and they have stepped up to the plate.

Throughout the month of August, they have a full slate of fundraising events including initiatives at Buffalo Wild Wings in Newmarket and Vaughan, three 'Celebrity Server' events at Boston Pizzas in Aurora, Stouffville and Markham, as well as grocery bagging days at Loblaw's.

?In order to even further raise our donations, we have numerous corporate donors who have helped our team, such as Davis Orthodontics, Le Biftheque Steakhouse & Bar, Roots and Loblaw's, and support has been great so far,? says Kiyana. ?Mayor Dawe has been an integral part of our team helping us grow further in the community.?

If you would like to support the CDS Runners in their efforts for the RBC Race for the Kids, visit support.rbcraceforthekids.ca and input the team name.

The students will also hold their fundraising nights at Boston Pizza Aurora on Wednesday, August 23, from 6 ? 9 p.m., Boston Pizza Markham on September 10 from 12 noon to 4 p.m., and a further date at Boston Pizza Stouffville to be determined.

Buffalo Wild Wings dates include August 16 from 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. at their Vaughan location, and August 21 from 4 ? 9 p.m. in Newmarket.