

Student gives peers a platform to speak out at TEDx event

Youth want to speak out on the issues that matter to them, but all too often they don't have the platform to do so. It's a gap that was identified by Grade 12 student Sarah Asgari and it is a gap she has stepped up to bridge in her final year in secondary school.

Sarah, a student at Newmarket's Pickering College, was recently granted a license to run a TEDx Youth event as part of her graduating Capstone Project, the culmination of the school's Global Leadership Program, where youth are tasked with identifying challenges and coming up with innovative solutions.

Securing a TEDx license was no easy feat, but Sarah was willing to go the distance, fuelled by her passion to amplify not only her voice, but those of her peers.

"My Capstone Project is about youth having their voices heard and I found that the more research I did, I discovered people want to talk about issues but they just don't have the platform to do so," she says.

Once she secured the license, the next step was outreach. She didn't want just Pickering College students to step up and speak on the issues that mattered to them. She wanted broad outreach to schools across Ontario, and ended up curating an impressive group of students who wanted to bring a diverse range of topics to the platform.

"I wanted a wider platform," she says, noting that extending the invitation to students at other schools entailed a series of questions on the messages they wanted to get out as well as a video submission to gauge each potential participant's comfort level speaking in the virtual realm. "I met with the applicants once a week from January onward to make sure they were in the right part of their speech process and following the guidelines."

Among the guidelines was selecting an issue that was not too contentious, and one which could be shared succinctly and allowed speakers to take a clear stand.

"It was really interesting to get to know people and it was awesome seeing how passionate they were on what they were talking about," says Sarah. "It is exactly the message I wanted to impart with the audiences that people our age have things we want to talk about but just don't have the platform to do so. A lot of the topics we chose were very personal to the individual talking, about things they had a personal experience with, even volunteering. One participant spoke about her struggle with an eating disorder. One talked about journalism, which was very personal for them. It wasn't something they just glanced over and decided to do; they were topics where they had struggled. People having the courage to talk about their struggles was very inspiring and unexpected."

For Julia Hunt, Senior Director of Strategic Innovation at Pickering College, Sarah's securing the TEDx license was a testament to her "perseverance" in providing her fellow students with a forum.

"There's a lot of value in young people learning how to work with external organizations and how to provide the type of information that is necessary to execute this type of event," says Ms. Hunt. "Sarah had to follow quite a complex process, both within gaining approval from Pickering College to host such an event and, of course, being granted the license with the TEDx organization. For a young person to advocate for this type of event to go to schools, policies, meeting with the Assistant Head?it takes quite a lot of coordination.

"As the theme was to amplify youth voices, it was hoped [each speaker] would come with a story to share and something that would resonate with other young people. For students to practice the skills that universities and employers are consistently saying they want, this provided a great opportunity to develop these communication skills in a way that is not explicitly referenced in, perhaps, a curriculum document or a course. We often hear people in universities and employers say they want people who can collaborate well. This is an example of a group of young people who coordinated incredibly well to pull this together with very little adult support. The real benefit is having an opportunity to practice these skills that are so critical to their future success and being able to

do so in safe and supported environment.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter