

Students think globally and act locally on homelessness and hunger



By Brock Weir

Students don't often give sandwiches a second thought.

They are fairly standard fare, nothing to love, nothing to hate. But teens in Aurora High School's Students for Global Issues Club know otherwise. Through firsthand experience, they know all too well the difference a simple sandwich can make in the lives of people less fortunate.

Two short years ago, they began putting this philosophy into action, holding a "Sandwich Run", trekking into Downtown Toronto to give people living on the streets a boost.

"Although it was a small-time initiative, we really got to see what people face," says student David Kim. "It really touched me that this really happens in Toronto."

Since the initial Sandwich Run, teacher-advisor Suzanne Albert says she has seen the teens grow exponentially both in awareness and as people. On the first run, students were so "separated" from the issue they were actually "afraid" to make those first tentative steps and head out to participate, she says.

"Now, when we go on the Run, they feel they are people like us," she says. "They engage in conversations with them and they realise this is a sad state of affairs that exists in Toronto. They are trying to do their part and help raise awareness."

It is a conversation in which they hope to engage the wider Aurora community - be it in other schools across Town, or Aurora at large. The students do the Sandwich Run in conjunction with Project 417, an interfaith organization to help people in crisis. Their Sandwich Run is often seen as a launching pad towards helping people in a greater fashion.

On an average run, teams can deliver up to 100 lunches.

Within the school, Students for Global Issues was founded by David's elder brother Sam who saw the need to get beyond the "affluent neighbourhoods" of Aurora, outside of the "bubble" and see what really goes on in the world.

"It was intended to help students and understand and educate them about world issues, while helping them learn some business strategies and real life skills," says David.

Business strategies are key in this program, not only to learn these vital business skills for further down the road, but also to ensure

they get the message they would like to highlight out to their peers as effectively as possible.

One of these methods was held just two short months ago in the lead up to the holidays, selling Christmas Cards designed by the club which not only provided holiday greetings but also served to provide their recipients with information on Project 417.

In the club's first year, they focused on mental health, which was a particular passion project for Sam, they say. The following year, they shifted gears towards world hunger, but this year they focused their attention on hunger much closer to home.

'We took it to the group back in September and thought, let's just decide what we want to do with this group and what our goals are going to be and ways we can achieve that goal,' says student Declan Johnston. 'We came up with ways to raise money, raise awareness and to work towards our goal, supporting homeless people in the GTA.'

Adds David: 'They work a lot with homelessness, and also with teens who are at risk or women who are in the sex trade. They have safe houses for a lot of women and they do a lot to reach out into the community. [Trevor Wright] and I decided to choose them as an organization to help out and follow their mandate. We just keep it real.'

Building on the success and proceeds from their Christmas Card drive, they parlayed these profits into purchasing socks for Project 417 clients, a simple garment but one that is in high demand to help homeless in the GTA, particularly during the winter months.

Students in the club take pride in the fact their group is truly student oriented. They pitch their own ideas on how to help to the group as a whole.

They debate the merits of each idea. Some are supported, other ideas are tactfully consigned to the waste basket. Those rising to the top are tackled by the students breaking out into smaller subcommittees within the group building on each student's individual skillsets and talents to make it happen.

'One of the really interesting things is doing this with a business model,' says Trevor. 'A lot of clubs get together, discuss something and go out and do something. With a business model, it helps give us the opportunity have meetings, list ideas, brainstorm, and effectively say, 'Nope, that is a bad idea and wipe it off the table.'

While the students plan an additional Sandwich Run this spring, they are currently tackling a speaker series to involve the entire school community - students, teachers and parents - on thinking globally.

'I think being in a club really benefits our knowledge of the homelessness around the area, but hopefully in the upcoming semester, we're going to make it more towards our community,' says member Audrey Kearns.

Adds Declan: 'We hope to give the community an idea of what we have been learning about. We want to get the club out into the rest of the community beyond our school and beyond even other high schools to raise awareness with adults and other children.'