

Walking a mile in their shoes: 360Kids helps students understand youth homelessness



By Brock Weir

"It must be really bad, but what can I do about it?"

This was the thought that went through Maryam M's mind whenever she saw a homeless person.

The Grade 6 student simply thought there was nothing in her power to make a difference, even a loonie wouldn't have much of an impact.

"I always thought in order for there to be big change, there has to be a big committee towards that topic," she says. "I never thought I could do anything about homeless or homeless youth, and I would walk away like most people do. Boy, was I wrong to think that." Maryam, and her fellow grade six students at TMS Schools, had an eye opening experience on the Family Day weekend, walking in the shoes of homeless youth, in association with the 360 Kids Youth Shelter.

Over the past few months, students in Grades 4 through Six have been immersed in workshops with 360 Kids representatives learning about the needs of youth who use their services and resources, as well as exploring the issues of affordable housing, precarious employment and mental health.

The kids put this knowledge into action by participating in their first 360 Kids sleepover, which was designed to give youth the opportunity to experience the challenges and choices facing youth who aren't as fortunate.

The overnight experience was hoped to not only raise money for 360 Kids, but foster an empathy while simulating a typical night for a homeless youth.

"Our students have been inspired to become engaged citizens and, in the meantime, contribute to this supportive organization in various ways," said teacher Rachel Marks. "They are learning that giving can come in many forms."

When Milad M. saw homeless youth, he says he too felt a sense of sadness and the helplessness of not being able to lend a hand.

"This experience really opened up a new world of possibilities to help people and gave me a different perspective on homelessness," he says. "When I was doing the experience we had to create a shelter with two things: cardboard boxes and a tarp. Some of us didn't have a tarp at all. We only had one cardboard box per person and we could team up with others and this challenge was extremely challenging. Boxes kept falling because of wind and the tarps were flying through the air. Most of us were in teams, so we all thought, imagine doing this alone almost every day fixing a little shelter, uncomfortable as it was, and calling it home.

"There was also the cold wind chilling us up even though we had jackets, snow pants, gloves, hats, and scarves trying to warm us up. We imagined having old clothes unwashed and used, and knowing what I would really need if I find myself homeless helps me know what they need."

The experience was not only an eye opener on the struggles homeless go through each and every day just to make it through the night, but it was also an eye opener that these struggles are being faced by homeless youth not that much older than themselves.

"When I saw that so many kids were homeless, I was very surprised," says Kurtis Ng. "I knew that there were homeless people in York Region but I didn't know that some of them were kids."

Adds Milad: "You don't see the people as they are usually portrayed. Homeless people look just like all of us in the way that they aren't really dirty, their clothes aren't always ripped or torn and they do have an education in public schools. All of the details I

mentioned were once what I thought of homeless people and since I didn't see any of that I thought that there probably weren't any homeless people. This is called invisible homelessness and it happens everywhere even when we can't see it.?

But, this didn't surprise Maryam. It is an issue many choose to ignore, she says, because people have that 'unfortunate' mindset that there is nothing they can do to help.

'I think anyone can do anything to help: you could donate, you could go buy homes for them, buy furniture, take them in with your family. There are many things we can do to help as individuals and as a group,' she says. 'After this experience however I saw how caring 360 was, and how they took the time to come teach us how it felt and how we could make a change. After seeing this, I was very happy 360 kids supported these kinds of people. From now on, when I want to help, I would donate lots of money to homelessyouth organizations, and if I ever saw a homeless youth, I know where to call: 360 Kids.'