

12 Days of Light sparks fire of giving in local students



By Brock Weir

It was the culmination of their school's 12 Days of Light, but St. Max students didn't let rain get in the way of lighting sparks of hope on the streets of Toronto.

Grade 12 students, along with their teachers, loaded up two busloads of collected clothes, gift cards, and other items to deliver to Toronto-based shelters and community organizations on Monday afternoon, heading out for an evening of delivering their precious cargo as well as distributing sandwiches, baked goods, and scarves hand-crafted by the school's fashion department to people in need they encountered along the way.

"I think we're all overwhelmed and shocked at how well everyone has done," said Amelia Card as they got ready to pack the buses. "We didn't expect this outcome."

Added Chawa Mhango: "It shows how much students here really care about the issue and they want to make a difference. It really shows."

And it wasn't due to lack of effort. Divvying out tasks, Amelia was just one student in charge of getting the word out through social media challenges, while Chawa was tasked with delivering the message during morning announcements and during a recent school-wide mass. Carlea Blight was in charge of decorations – and if you think decorations was simply throwing up a bunch of balloons, think again. It was making sure the message was visible for all to see.

"We have to raise awareness that there is poverty here in Canada, not just in other parts of the world," said Carlea. "This [program] has opened our eyes to people in the world around us and how we can help."

Among the teachers spearheading the 12 Days of Light campaign are Rob McGarrigle and Lesley Williams.

Early in the year, they decided on a program to allow students to learn about very real issues in the world – local issues including youth poverty and wider issues including the Syrian Refugee Crisis – and make a difference within their own community.

"Traditionally, our school has contributed to various charities around Christmastime, but this time we took it a step further by having the students not only contribute to good causes but study about the issues themselves," said Mr. McGarrigle.

His religion class focused on the issue of youth homelessness, while Ms. Williams' class examined issues related to poverty. Students broke into groups to research issues themselves and find out more about agencies working to combat these problems.

?As the teacher of the class, I was expecting them to have the basics, but they really went over the top,? he said. ?They were able to learn about the issues, connect with them, and they were able to come up with ways to make this drive successful. This is a tradition they do every year, but I don't think they have had this much contributed before. This has been really successful!?

Added Ms. Williams: We wanted them to take away a real-life experience and an understanding of the social justice issues that are in our society, especially poverty and homelessness, to understand that it is there in our own back yards and to know how fortunate they are as students who come to a wonderful school, have clothing on their backs and have all the technology and resources available to them.

?I think they were astonished by the clothes they have actually collected. They weren't anticipating such a success at the end of it, but they are very proud of themselves and getting excited to get out there. I don't think they have processed that they actually have to lug all this stuff down into the city and the streets, but they are definitely looking forward to it.?