

Cardinal Carter student inspires through Canada Reads



By Brock Weir

If you happened to turn on CBC Radio for Canada Reads this week and thought you heard a few familiar voices ? you were right, thanks to Sheetal Kapadia.

Sheetal, a Grade 10 student at Cardinal Carter Catholic High School, found herself in a whirlwind last week after one of her writing submissions landed the school a visit from Canada Reads host Ali Hassan and Canada Reads panellist Humble the Poet on Friday afternoon.

Open to kids and teens in Grades 7 to 12, the contest tasked students with reflecting on their favourite spots in the GTA and, setting pen to paper ? or fingers to keyboard ? formulating that experience into a piece up to 150 words.

Sheetal's piece on a goodwill gesture observed at Toronto's Union Station was announced as the winner last Tuesday and just a couple of days later, the school library was abuzz with anticipation as students gathered to meet Hassan and Humble and ask questions, all of which was recorded by the national broadcaster.

?I wrote a story about someone who spent the day touring around Toronto, seeing some of the big sites like the CN Tower and the ROM, and ended up on a northbound train home from Union,? said Sheetal. ?She ended up having a not-so-good experience at Union Station, tripping over stairs, dropping her wallet, hurting her knee, but the main part of the story was when she went to pay her ticket the man at the ticket stand told her someone had already paid for her, wanting to lend a helping hand. My story was about despite being a big, huge hyped-up city, we still believe in the small little things.?

It was this positivity that struck a chord with Mr. Hassan, a stand-up comedian.

Before assuming the mantle of this year's Canada Reads moderator, the CBC's annual battle of the books competition, which regularly sends selected novels shooting to the top of bestseller lists, Mr. Hassan said he had no idea how much competitions like these would engage youth.

?I haven't been just pleasantly surprised, but also overwhelmed at the response of so many kids,? said Mr. Hassan. ?CBC has that stereotype of skewing older, but I have met people in their 20s and 30s who come out to comedy shows and they will tell me they actually have Canada Reads parties at their house, not listening during the day, but getting together to eat, drink and listen at night ? and that is amazing.

?I was floored by that because we live in a time where I think literacy, reading and education is more important than ever. My parents are from Pakistan and the biggest problem is lack of education. As we look around North America, there is a lot of that same stuff at work. So, to see kids so excited by literacy makes me very, very happy to have a part of that.?

As a former elementary school teacher, Humble the Poet ? otherwise known as Kanwer Singh ? knows that excitement all too well. Every human being loves to read, he said, but it is a matter of finding the right things to read.

?When I was a teacher, we were telling the parents, ?look, your kids can read the back of the cereal box. As long as they are reading,? he said. ?As long as they don't associate reading with a chore then we win. Reading is the trunk of the tree for everything.?

There was winning all around as the students gathered and peppered the CBC personalities with questions, and it also fostered a sense of excitement.

Sheetel was encouraged to enter the contest by teacher Lisa Craveiro, who encouraged all her students to seize the opportunity. "I feel very strongly that you should take all these opportunities as they arise," said Ms. Craveiro. "I wish I had taken more of these opportunities when I was a little bit younger, so I get very excited when I hear about these and promote them to students. I was hoping that [by writing] they would feel comfortable getting themselves out there, even if they won or lost."

Mission accomplished. Although Sheetel doesn't know whether she wants to pursue a future in writing, she said it has boosted her confidence.

"My writing was something I didn't have faith in, but I had proved myself wrong and it gave me confidence," she said.

Friday's talk wasn't the last of Sheetel's and Cardinal Carter's involvement with Canada Reads. This past Tuesday, March 28, Ms. Craveiro took the Grade 10 English students down to the CBC's Toronto headquarters for the Canada Reads panel discussion.