

Community Recognition Awards: Principal receives Inclusivity honour for breaking down barriers

During her time as Principal of Regency Acres Public School, Lisa Leoni dedicated her time to breaking down barriers wherever she could.

From making healthy food readily accessible to students in need to fostering a welcoming environment for students from what might be considered marginalized communities, these efforts have paid dividends for the venerable neighbourhood school ? and her efforts did not go unnoticed.

Earlier this year, Ms. Leoni was honoured by the Town of Aurora with the Inclusivity Award, part of the Town's Community Recognition Awards program.

The Inclusivity Award is dedicated each year to an individual, group or business which has contribute to ?making the Town a more accessible and inclusive place to live, work and play for all people.?

?Lisa has dedicated her work to create an equitable and inclusive school for students and their families by reaching young people and by teaching them about respect, inclusivity and kindness,? said Mayor Tom Mrakas, who hosted this year's Community Recognition Awards virtually. ?Lisa has achieved the ultimate goal of making Aurora a better place to live and grow for generations to come.

?Lisa recognizes that it is crucial for her students to have a positive mindset. She initiated the Mindfulness Room. This is a dedicated space to support students' mental health and social wellbeing through the day at school. For physical health, Lisa has partnered with Activate Aurora as they co-organize community events such as Pause to Play. Lisa supports the school's initiative for the Snack Cart where students can access healthy snack items throughout the day as many of them might not even have access to breakfast in the morning. The program has no stigma around it so students feel comfortable getting food when they need it. When the school has new families, she shares community supports and services that will visit them in their homes to help them with language barriers and assist with navigating community services.?

Mayor Mrakas also paid tribute to Ms. Leoni's efforts to establish education related to the findings of the Truth & Reconciliation Commission and to recognize topics related to the LGBTQ2S+ community. As such, Regency Acres has the first ever elementary Gender Sexuality Alliance (GSA).

?It has been an honour to serve the Aurora community for more than five years as the Principal of Regency Acres Public School,? said Ms. Leoni. ?This award represents a collective effort, so I want to extend a deep appreciation to staff at Regency who model a sincere dedication to the families they serve and for ensuring that student identities are placed in the centre and the heart of the work we do at school. Together, we established our first GSA, a mindfulness room to ensure ongoing mental health supports, a space for newcomer families, wholesome food programs, a huge makerspace, and?we make deliberate efforts to focus on Indigenous education and teach the truth.

?As a school leader, I believe in the importance of facilitating community partnerships that brings everyone to the table. As someone who benefits from white privilege, it was important for me to partner with the Indigenous Black, Muslim, Jewish and 2SLGBTQ communities to establish a process where community voice is heart and for the school to serve as a strong hub for community action planning.

?It is our mandate and professional responsibility to challenge barriers and transform our practices.

For those of us who may sometimes wrestle in that middle space between theory and practice, my hope is that we push ourselves and demonstrate leadership by doing and continue to evaluate our impacts and question our intentions. Each of us in whatever role we

serve can work within our sphere of influence and responsibility to make a difference in this world.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter