

Aurora's Chen Liu set to receive Duke of Edinburgh gold



By Brock Weir

In a time where so many people his age can't wait to get up in the morning with a bit of Snapchat or wind down at night seeing what people have been up to on Facebook, Chen Liu relished the chance to simply disconnect.

The Aurora student was in Algonquin Park last year for a five day, four night campout. He had never been away from home that long on a camping trip, and it turned out to be a very memorable experience.

"I have never been pushed in that kind of sense, both mentally and physically," he recalls. "There was a lot of portaging, a lot of early mornings and late nights, backbreaking work carrying all those packs, so it was very mentally straining and, of course, physically tiring."

But, it was all worth it in the end. Mr. Liu, a recent graduate of Aurora High School, was camping as part of his "adventurous journey," a key component of the Duke of Edinburgh's Awards program, which was instituted by Prince Philip in 1956 and in 1964 in Canada to give students a chance to build themselves while volunteering in the community, learning new skills, and pushing themselves to the limit.

Having been plugging away at the program since the start of high school, Chen is expected to receive his Gold Award at a ceremony in Toronto this fall.

It is a long way from those early Grade 9 days when he was slightly reluctant to put himself to the challenge.

"It feels great," he says. "I am definitely proud of myself and it is just great to accomplish something I have put this much effort into. I spent at least three hours a week doing the Duke of Edinburgh program for two years and that teaches you some very valuable lessons."

"Originally, I wasn't too hot about the program. My stepdad came to me one day and said, "there is a fantastic program for self-development and I think you'd be very good at it."

At the start of Grade 9, students usually think they have bigger fish to fry as they navigate through a completely new world, and Chen was no exception. He "brushed off the idea" of enrolling in the program for a while, he says, to focus on his studies and hang out with his friends, but eventually he decided to give it a whirl.

"I found once I started getting into the program it helped me achieve so many things I wouldn't have done if I hadn't joined the

program," he says, noting he ramped up performing his clarinet as part of the skills-building component of the program, while filling the community service aspect by throwing himself into the organization of Aurora High's inaugural Relay for Life, a huge success he helped coordinate in its second year this past spring.

"It helped me really push myself," he says of keeping his eye on the Gold. "When I started the program I think I was a little too closed-minded, but it is very important to go into the program with an open mind. There is so much you can learn from the adventurous journey out in the wilderness, or wherever you choose to go, and there is so much to learn from the time management perspective of the program. I could have learned a lot more if I tried more things and to this day that is something I regret.

Gold Awards in the Duke of Edinburgh Program are typically handed out in glittering ceremonies presided over by a member of the Royal Family or a Vice Regal representative, often the Governor General. When Chen learned he was in line to receive the award this fall, he hoped he would have the chance to receive it from either William or Kate when they come to Canada this month, but now that it has been announced this month's tour will take the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge to the West Coast, it is anyone's guess who might be heading the ceremony.

In the meantime, he is excited waiting for his name to be called and offers some words to incoming high school students thinking about taking on the challenge.

"For those of you who are going into Grade 9, I know you guys will have a lot on your plate with school and the transition into high school, but one thing I can tell you is the friends that you make in this program and the experiences you get from this program are things that stay with you for a lifetime," he says. "While your friends may change, your subjects may change, the one thing that doesn't change are the benefits you reap and the experiences you get from this program."

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