

Being difference makers is a team goal at Rick Hansen P.S.

By Brock Weir

It only takes one person to make a difference in the world, but being the difference-makers in the world around them is a team effort for the students and teachers at Rick Hansen Public School.

When the bell rang on Friday afternoon, elementary and secondary school kids were off the hook until the New Year, but going home last week the Rick Hansen community was sure in the knowledge that their efforts would soon make a lasting difference.

By Thursday, hats and gloves were obscuring the greenery of the school's Christmas Tree as the students' hat and mitten drive went into the home stretch. The woolly clothes collected during this drive will be distributed as gifts to local families in need at the annual Christmas meal hosted by Jonathan's Restaurant.

While the kids looked after the hats and gloves, teachers on the other hand, pooled their annual gifts of soaps and other toiletries, donating them to the women and children at Yellow Brick House.

As these gifts bring smiles to the faces of recipients throughout the holiday season, these efforts to make a difference are, two years after its opening, becoming second nature to the Rick Hansen Community, according to teacher Ingrid LaGros, who heads their Positive Climates for Learning (PC4L) program.

“PC4L takes into account healthy schools, active living, social justice, equity and really trying to develop a culture in the school,” says Ms. LaGros. “One of the things we have been doing from students participating is trying to develop initiatives that get the whole school involved in Making a Difference, which is our big idea for the whole school. In our student council, there is a Positive Climates committee that helps run all our initiatives and helps us decide what we would like to do next.”

As for the teachers, their third-annual drive for Yellow Brick House brought in a bumper crop of donations not just from the teachers, but also the surrounding Rick Hansen community.

“As a teacher, you receive a lot of gifts,” says teacher Laura Britten, who is one of a three-member team in their community classroom. “You often get lots of soaps and shampoos that you won't use at home and they often go to waste. So, we re-gift these to a worthy cause. It is just amazing to see how willing this community is to help families. Christmas isn't all about Santa Claus coming to Town; it is about giving to people in need.”

This fall, the group led a food drive. Just a few short weeks ago, primary students up to Grade 2 put their best feet forward in their annual holiday concert, raising awareness for local organizations, and many of these efforts culminated in a \$275 donation to the York Region Children's Aid Society, where students plan to adopt families for gift giving next season.

In the early days of these efforts, Ms. LaGros says she was often left asking kids what they thought of certain initiatives, but getting students to take ownership of these initiative, was an entirely different challenge. Not so anymore.

“Now, we actually have kids asking, “Why don't we do this? Why don't we do that?”” she says. “I make contact with the organizations and they do the announcements, they do the organizing, they do the collection and everything. It has now shifted from teacher-led to student-led, which is really where you want it to be because it has them thinking about how to make a difference in their community.”

“The most exciting part of it for me is the students are making the commitment to take the time to think about it, internalize it and find out what resonates with them. No matter what we do, the kids now have the mentality that now we're trying to make someone's life better. Whatever the initiative is, that is our end goal. I think the fact they're now thinking about it themselves is what excites me the most ? that change in mindset of how can I make a difference in the lives of somebody else, and how can I encourage others to

do the same??

Adds Ms. Britten: ?The staff and students here are absolutely fantastic. They would give you the shirt off their back if they could just help the community.?