

Give Back Award honourees charted new ground in volunteerism



Grade 12 students are not only giving back to their communities through volunteerism, they're leaving lasting legacies behind at their schools.

20 York Region students were honoured with 2023 Give Back Awards at Magna International's Aurora headquarters to coincide with National Volunteer Week. The Give Back Awards are handed out each year to 20 students in northern York Region as a way to recognize their community-building efforts rather than strictly their academic success.

“Something unique we've started to see this year and over the last few years are how many students have actually started their own non-profit organization or social enterprise and are really finding ways to make volunteering, community engagement and community support a part of their bigger life picture and life plan,” says Neighbourhood Network manager Erin Cerenzia.

“A unique volunteer experience that stands out to me, one of participants Aydin Visanji spent time during the pandemic taking the photos that belong to seniors in the community and digitally restoring them and enhancing them. That way, if they were feeling isolated, they were able to reflect and look back at family memories, family times, and have those photos digitally restored and printed, which I thought was a really unique volunteer opportunity and something we've never seen before at Neighbourhood Network.”

Last week, we highlighted the first 10 recipients honoured on April 20. This week, we're shining a light on the second cohort, beginning with Aydin.

AYDIN VISANJI (Cardinal Carter CHS) “During the early stages of the pandemic, Aydin saw an important need for education support and founded Impact Tutoring, a free, volunteer-based service to students,” reads Aydin's citation. “He also collaborated with the YMCA to offer English tutoring to new Immigrants. Using his passion for photography, Aydin took on a project restoring old photos for seniors to give them back a piece of their history throughout the pandemic. Aydin volunteers as President of his school's Legacy Council, a mentor for second-grade students, and he delivers Christmas Cards to local shelters. He believes giving back means creating an enduring cycle of positive change.”

SHYAM SUBRAMANYAM (Pickering College) “Serving as the Social Media Coordinator for Revolution Now, Shyam worked with artists from marginalized communities to create shirts that raised over \$14,000 for various charities. As the Youth Action

Organization Chair at his school, he helped raise funds for the **Newmarket Food Pantry** to support those who lost their livelihoods during the pandemic. Shyam's interest in public speaking led him to coach younger students for competitions, as well as volunteer as a Student Ambassador. One of his best experiences was delivering his own TEDx Youth Talk, which helped him solidify the notion that youth voices deserve respect. Shyam says he volunteers 'because it reminds [him] of the beauty of collaboration and the future it creates for us.'

MEGHAN STEWART (Huron Heights SS) 'Meghan's compassion and empathy for others shines through in her work with **The Food Bank of York Region** and the Holland Landing Food Pantry (**East Gwillimbury Public Library**), where she spends time harvesting, sorting, prepping, and raising funds to help fight food insecurity in York Region. Her passion for animals led her to work with the Community Veterinary Outreach Program, which provides preventive veterinary care and resources for marginalized individuals and their pets. Meghan also helps with her school's Social Justice Days, at camp sessions with equestrian riding facilities, and collecting food, clothing, and hygiene items for the **LOFT Community Services** Street Outreach Van. She believes that volunteering often gives you unexpected surprises, new friendships, opportunities, and can even lead to new passions.'

ABBY STORY (Sutton District HS) 'A passionate, kind, and relentless supporter of children with special needs, Abby is their biggest cheerleader! As a volunteer in her school's Community Autism Class, Abby uses her skills and talents to develop and nurture the learning and social capabilities of Autistic children. When schools were closed due to COVID-19, Abby maintained a connection with the students by joining their online sessions. She also demonstrated her belief in the power of diversity and inclusivity by writing and delivering a presentation to the entire student body on World Autism Day. On top of this, Abby uses her leadership skills on the Student Council Executive Team, as a Student Ambassador, by helping at school events, and making positive changes in her peers' lives.'

JAIME STRUTHERS (Huron Heights SS) 'I want the best for those in my community, which is why I'm passionate about what I do,' says Jamie when asked why she volunteers. Jaime loves mentoring the youth at her church and fundraising for their Christmas Shoebox initiative, which sends gifts, school supplies, and personal care essentials to children all over the world. At her local veterinary hospital, Jamie supports animals and their families who require veterinary services. As a Camp Chief and recipient of the Chief Scout award, Jamie has been an inspirational and valued part of the 1st Holland Landing Cub Group leadership team. Part of her legacy includes helping fundraise for young, underprivileged Scouts to participate in global Scouting excursions.'

ANNA TAMIN (Newmarket High School) 'Anna's volunteer efforts have led her to a diverse number of activities that supported her school and the community. She designed artwork for seniors in isolation during the pandemic. She is a Peer Mentor to incoming students as they transition from Grade 8 to high school, and she helps at her local food pantry, collecting, sorting, and distributing donations. She also uses her athletic skills to coach others in baton twirling, curling, and swimming. Anna feels volunteering has played a significant role in shaping not only her time in high school, but her personal identity and passion for staying connected with her community.'

CHRISTINA WANG (Sacred Heart CHS) 'As a volunteer, Christina hopes to help others feel heard, supported, and safe, all while building a closer-knit community where everyone feels a sense of belonging. Christina founded a non-profit app called 'Volunreach,' which connects students all over the world with volunteers so they can learn math and English skills. She also founded her school's United Nations Committee and organized important fundraisers to support those experiencing homelessness, provide relief to those in Ukraine, and for **Canadian Blood Services**.'

MAX WONG (Stouffville District HS) 'Max believes that volunteering should not be measured in time or money, but by its impact on others, and yourself! As president of his school's Student Council, he has played a key role in organizing numerous successful events that were inclusive of the entire school community. Max volunteers with **Carefirst Seniors & Community Services Association** in Vaccination Awareness, Elderly Appreciation, and their Python Workshop to support local seniors. He also helps provide insight on issues related to racial inequality in the education system with the **Scarborough Youth United**, saying that 'one person's actions and ideas can lead to many others following in their footsteps to work towards a greater cause.'

BRUCE YU (Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School) 'Giving back means supporting the community that has always had my

back,' says Bruce, of his passion for volunteering. Bruce served as President of his school's Student Council. With over 1,900 Community Involvement Hours, he has led fundraisers for **Southlake Regional Health Centre**, organized Spirit Days, created a blog that helped students with their exam studies, and helped to develop policy changes to benefit the entire student body. Outside of school, Bruce is the volunteer Executive Director of the Federation of Canadian Secondary Students, leading conferences to help students make the most of their high school experiences.?

EMMA ZABIELSKI (Sutton District HS) ? ?Emma is a devoted and thoughtful team player who enthusiastically volunteers in many school events and initiatives, including Jack.Org, Student Council, and Relay for Life, where she is the event's Co-Chair. She is also a passionate advocate for children with disabilities. This passion prompted Emma to create the Spark Project - a community event aimed at helping children on the Autism Spectrum and their families learn about resources and services available to them. For Emma, giving back is to ?continue to share [her] experiences and spread the kindness and support that others have shown.' She plans to continue to follow her passions by working with children on the Autism Spectrum.?

?At the heart of it, it comes down to how volunteering impacted each and every one of them,? says Cerenzia on what makes a successful applicant for next year's honours. ?When you read their applications and you look at their bios on our website and on our social media, you can tell that their volunteer experience wasn't just about getting those required hours in order to graduate. Grade 11s and parents who are looking at the Give Back Awards for the future, think about and reflect on the ways that volunteering has impacted you and how you want to tell us your story in the application and we look forward to receiving it.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter