

Give Back Award winners answered community's call



By Brock Weir

Josie Kearney knows she had advantages growing up.

She always had 'toys under the Christmas tree, a meal on my plate and a bed to sleep in,' but she knew she was lucky; many boys and girls here were not nearly as lucky.

But, unlike many others who simply go on with their day, the Grade 12 student at Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School set out to do something about it.

Her volunteer efforts, along with 19 of her peers from across York Region were recognized last week by Magna International and Neighbourhood Network with the Give Back Awards, a scholarship for students studying in the communities where Neighbourhood Network operates recognizing not grades but giving.

Receiving her award last week, Josie was recognized for her 'determination to do everything she can to help those in need,' ranging from planning the annual Terry Fox Run at her school, leading Williams' Peer Mentors, participating on the Athletic Council and spearheading Change for Change, an in-school initiative that allows students to participate in a toy drive without leaving the classroom.

'A lot about giving back was because I was fortunate to have such a great childhood,' she tells The Auroran. 'One of the biggest, most-rewarding experience was Habitat for Humanity and actually going to the build site. We do a lot of fundraising for it; we raised \$1,200 at the beginning of the year and we're working on another \$1,200 for a new build. Actually going to the site in October, we got to do a variety of jobs. Some of us were painting things, some of us were carrying wood. That was one of the most rewarding volunteer experiences that we could actually see a house being built from the ground up.'

For 'social entrepreneur' Lauren Ott, who was one of the very first Give Back Award recipients, this kind of giving back exemplifies the spirit of 'Minga.'

Ms. Ott first learned about 'Minga,' a phrase in Ecuador's Kichwa culture with no direct English translation, while teaching English in the South American Nation, before she embarked on a career with Me to We and, now Kits for a Cause.

'Minga has really been my compass,' Ms. Ott told the 20 assembled students, their parents, family, friends, and a host of dignitaries at last Thursday's ceremony, scheduled to coincide with National Volunteer Week. 'It is an idea built into the culture of coming together as people for the better good. Everyone here knows when you yell 'Volunteers needed,' you don't see swaths of people coming together, but if you are ever in Ecuador, you call Minga, everyone, regardless of what they are doing, whether or not they know the individual who is speaking, they all come together for the common good. While I was living in Ecuador, I witnessed Mingas for families that didn't have food. They all needed to make sure this family has lunch today.'

'In a culture where we have a word for 'loonie', 'toonie,' how come we don't have a word in English for Minga? Whether or not you realise it tonight, you are all here for a Minga.'

In all, nine students from Aurora were honoured.

This week, in the first of two instalments, the Auroran will shine a spotlight on five of these Grade 12 graduates.

MAIYA BERTOLA (Sacred Heart Catholic High School) -- To Maiya, giving back means spreading equal opportunity to everyone in the community. She volunteers for the Town of Aurora as an assistant summer camp Councillor, community tree planting events with the Aurora Community Band, and in numerous elementary schools. Maiya also helps Marquee Theatrical Productions, is a peer tutor and with her school's Relay for Life Committee. Maiya has been inspired through her years as a volunteer for the Aurora FC stinger stars program, where she provides one on one help and coaching to children with disabilities who want to play soccer.

TRISTAN HICKS (St. Andrew's College) ? Tristan feels that volunteering has been a privilege and that there is no better feeling in the world than giving. Since 2014, Tristan has volunteered with the Highland Cadet Corps where he leads his peers and provides training to younger cadets. He has helped at the Aurora Montessori School, with the Town of Aurora Summer Camps, and is a volunteer actor in focus Festival plays and at local baseball tournaments. He also volunteers as House Captain where he mentors middle school students and on the Andrean Life Council planning events to enhance school spirit and engagement. Congratulations, Tristan.

RACHEL IN (Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School) ? Ever since Rachel was a young girl, she always wanted to help others and believes that her parents helped inspire her to give back. She has been volunteering for the Milal Mission since Grade 4, where she helps those with mental and physical disabilities. She gives back in school as a member of Best Buddies, the Peer Mentorship program, Me to We, Habitat for Humanity, as President of the Music Council, and as a math tutor. She also volunteers for compassion Canada, helping children living in poverty.

JOSIE KEARNEY (Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School) ? For as long as Josie can remember, helping others has been her passion. She has the determination to do everything she can to help those in need. She volunteers in school as a planner for the annual Terry Fox Run and for Habitat for Humanity. She is the head of peer mentors, the executive of the Williams Athletic Council and as a math tutor as well. Josie gives back to the community at initiatives like Spring Tree Planting, Run for Rep, and Coldest Night of the Year. She also founded an initiative called Change for Change, where students can participate in a toy drive without leaving the classroom.

MADISYN LAMOURE (St. Maximilian Kolbe Catholic Secondary School) ? Madisyn says there is something very liberating, empowering and satisfying about making a difference. Madisyn began volunteering in Grade 8 with her school's Anti Bullying campaign. She completed her Counsellor in Training Certification, volunteers as a Town of Aurora Camp Counsellor and is a leisure buddy, providing one on one support for children with disabilities so they can participate in sport and recreation programs. She also is a volunteer for the Central York Girls Hockey Association, the Newmarket Skating Club, Aurora FC, and the Aurora Skating Club.