

Give Back Awards celebrate students and their more than 5,000 hours of community contributions



Ananya Murlidharan is driven by collaboration.

The Grade 12 student from Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School has fostered that during her high school career and is looking forward to doing that in her post-secondary education as well, pursuing studies in biomedical engineering.

“I plan on ensuring that biomedical technology is more accessible for people in the future to ensure that we’re able to use the knowledge we have as a society to help people and make it more accessible to people who are in need, and also make it more accessible to our community because, if we have this knowledge, we must help each other.”

Murlidharan’s future goals echo the legacy she is set to leave behind at Williams, as well as the contributions that were recognized last Thursday night as she and 19 of her peers were presented with the 2024 Give Back Awards by Neighbourhood Network.

Held at the headquarters at Magna International on Thursday, April 18 to coincide with National Volunteer Week, the ceremony honoured 20 students from Aurora, King, Newmarket, Whitchurch-Stouffville, East Gwillimbury and Georgina for the contributions they have made to their school environment.

“For 15 years now, Magna’s Neighbourhood Network team has been honouring the exceptional volunteer achievements of graduating high school students through our Give Back awards program and is part of our National Volunteer Week celebrations,” said Erin Cerenzia, Manager of Community Relations for Magna International. “Thanks to your dedication to building better communities together, you have all collectively donated close to 5,000 hours of volunteer time during your high school years and that number is an incredible feat in and of itself, but especially when we consider that our group of recipients did this amidst the challenges of a global pandemic, many, many lockdowns, and, of course, we know that because they’re volunteers they’re very humble and that probably doesn’t reflect their true commitment of service.”

These sentiments were reflected by Magna’s Kelly Harbridge, who said the students assembled there last week were “inspiring young leaders” who have given so much to their communities.

“Today we gather to celebrate the extraordinary achievements of 20 outstanding young individuals whose unwavering dedication to volunteerism has not only enriched the lives of all those people they have helped but has also inspired us all,” he said. “I would be

remiss if I didn't recognize the parents, families and teachers who supported so many of these young people, young leaders, along the way. Philanthropy begins at home, as does charity, and so many of these young people here today wouldn't have got involved in terms of volunteering with their communities if it wasn't for all the excellent role models within their families. On behalf of all the parents here in the room, I think you deserve a round of applause for raising some fantastic young people.?

This year's recipients include:

Ananya Murlidharan ? Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School

Ariel George ? King City Secondary School

Aryana Molla ? Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School

Avery Moschee ? Sir William Mulock Secondary School

Cameron Stewart ? Cardinal Carter Catholic High School

Carson Wong ? Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School

Charlie Jackson ? Sir William Mulock Secondary School

Eden Traiberg ? Newmarket High School

Jaylah Hall ? Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School

Kiyan Sajadi ? Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School

Laurin Windebank ? Huron Heights Secondary School

Matthew Pang ? Sacred Heart Catholic High School

Matthew Pilling ? Sir William Mulock Secondary School

Michelle Kelly ? Dr. J.M. Denison Secondary School

Moira Boland ? Pickering College

Niki Zafar Heidari ? Huron Heights Secondary School

Parker Barnard ? Huron Heights Secondary School

Prisha Bhavsar ? Stouffville District Secondary School

Ryan Zhang ? Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School

Sophia Yu ? Newmarket High School

In her citation, which was delivered last week by former Aurora mayor Tim Jones, a Neighbourhood Network ambassador, Murlidharan was hailed for her community-building.

For Ananya, the act of giving back isn't just personal. She knows it's a catalyst for fostering a compassionate and supportive community that will thrive for years to come. Ananya is the editor of her school's newspaper, an executive member of the Changes by Coffee group, and the fundraising coach for her school's Relay for Life event. She has dedicated her time to tutoring grade eight students learning English as a second language and contributing to the Sringeri Vidy Bharati Foundation. Ananya says all these experiences have instilled in her a lifelong commitment to making a positive difference through harnessing collaboration.

In turn, she said the recognition made her feel like she had an impact on her community and that, in turn, motivates her to continue her work once she has left Williams behind.

"I think it's just about the idea of being able to collaborate with people one-on-one and help people in any way they need it," she said. "I think that helps me as well because I am able to help myself while helping those people. I am just grateful that I can apply almost my knowledge in any way these people require."

This idea of just being able to help is also a driving force with Cameron Stewart, a Special Olympics athlete who attends Cardinal Carter Catholic High School.

Cameron is motivated to use his own life experiences to inspire others, demonstrating that everyone has the power to make a difference in their own community," reads his citation. His involvement with Best Buddies, Choir, Special Olympics, Student Council and as a Grade 8 ambassador, shows the integral role Cameron plays as a leader amongst his peers. Beyond school, Cameron extends his generosity by crafting holiday cards for seniors, volunteering at the [MCC Care & Share Thrift Shop](#), the [Sharon Temple National Historic Site & Museum](#), participating in the [Town of Aurora](#) Santa Claus Parade, and helping with charity book fairs and other fundraisers.

Cameron's commitment to daily acts of kindness exemplifies his belief that everyone possesses the ability to contribute positively in their own unique way.

This is exactly what Cameron and his mother, Susan, hope his award underscores.

"In the future, I want to keep giving back to the community because they already give me the world, and now I want to give back to them," said Cameron, counting MCC, the Mission Store, and volunteerism at Newmarket's NewRoads Performing Arts Centre among his favourite opportunities. "If I can give something back to the community, then they can do great stuff out there; they can give a higher experience. When other volunteers go and experience more, maybe they can become role models."

Added Susan: "This just shows the community that Cameron can give back in his own way and that he is able to do everything that every other typical kid can do as well. It's just getting the opportunities and allowing others to see that he is able to give back to the community as they give to him!"

In the coming weeks, The Auroran will shine a spotlight on each of this year's Give Back Award recipients.

By Brock Weir
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