

Michelle Stewart is making a difference ? one smile at a time



By Brock Weir

A little positivity can go a very long way.

That is the guiding philosophy of Michelle Stewart.

An active volunteer in many parts of our community, Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School grad says she gets involved to ?make sure everybody has a positive outlook on life and to make sure everyone keeps smiling.?

When she entered Council Chambers this past spring to receive the Youth Volunteer Award at Aurora's 2017 Community Recognition Awards, there were plenty of smiles to go around and the broadest might have been from the individuals bringing her up to accept the award from Councillor Wendy Gaertner.

Still recovering from a concussion sustained in a fall from a horse several months ago, she was led into the ceremony by teachers Jocelyn Kervin and Mark Watkin who have been left awe-struck seeing, at a very personal level, just what the power of one ? and a team ? can do.

Mr. Watkin struggles to find the words to explain why he nominated Michelle for the Youth Achievement Award.

Among other endeavours, Michelle was honoured as a member of Sarah's Stars, an in-school club inspired by young Sarah, a local girl who was diagnosed with cancer in 2012 aged just five.

Since that diagnosis, the students have raised more than \$10,000 for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society of Canada, and registered dozens of individuals on the National Bone Marrow Donor registry with a simple cheek swab.

Sadly, Sarah Watkin lost her fight, but her father, Mark, is beyond proud that students like Michelle have ensured Sarah's memory will live on.

?Just to hear Sarah's name and hear that getting used in a positive way to help someone else, to pay it forward, is certainly an incredible thought in my mind,? says Mr. Watkin. ?To be able to pay it forward is, for me, the best thing possible. I love that about her and everyone who has participated in these events.

?When this first came up, I thought of all the students in the school; who do I know, who is just exemplary, who is just an amazing student and just wants to help everybody, and I don't think it took me very long to think of Michelle. She has really put back into the community. She is just a wonderful, caring student and I look forward to her doing many things in the future. I personally think she's going to be the next astronaut! She is just an amazing girl.?

Ms. Kervin shares in this sentiment, calling Michelle ?the absolute epitome of positivity.?

?There are very few people who just exude such joy in life and have such joy in other people,? says Ms. Kervin. ?As well as helping out with Sarah's Stars and running that, she is the president of our music council, she is a Best Buddy helping out in our Special Needs classes and just loves it, and the kids love her. She always has a smile on her face.

?She is struggling with a concussion right now and has just fought like mad to continue her schooling and continue being involved from a distance as much as she can. She is just so bright and lovely. She is a gorgeous, shining star and she just walks in and immediately lights up a room. You just want to help her help others in any way you possibly can. It is such a joy.?

Ms. Kervin also knew Sarah Watkin and recalls her not only growing up as a girl but becoming a growing part of the Dr. G.W. Williams Community. Students like Megan Harris, Haven Moulds, and Abigail Kearney, she said, started the program and ran with it and they, in turn, were able to teach younger students like Michelle to keep paying it forward.

It is an enduring legacy.

As the school year begins, Michelle continues her recovery but is eager to take her place at Niagara College, where she plans to become an aesthetician.

?Winning [the Youth Achievement Award] was an incredible feeling after going through the concussion,? she told The Auroran this week. ?It had me so down because I wanted to do so much more with my school, but being stuck in bed for almost eight months made my mental abilities go down. Having the opportunity to win such an amazing award, and even being nominated, just made me so happy and proud to continue volunteering even now.?

She hopes to plant the seeds for Sarah's Stars in Niagara when she gets there.

?I want to make sure Sarah's Stars lives on and continues to grow and keep Sarah's name really bright in people's eyes. When you think of Sarah, you think of that amazing little girl who was fighting for her life, and we continue to share that legacy.?