

Optimists focus on food insecurity, student wellbeing in Back-to-School season



It's often joked that back-to-school season is a joyous time for parents as kids will be back out of the house and hitting the books.

But the same can't be said for all local families. In fact, the back-to-school season can sometimes be a very stressful one as families struggle to make ends meet and ensure their kids have everything they need to start the year off on the right foot.

For more than a decade, the Optimist Club of Aurora has worked hard to make the return to school as smooth as possible for local families in need, but this year they have joined forces with their counterparts in Newmarket, Richmond Hill and Keswick to have an even bigger impact on local families.

And a recent boost from Magna's Hoedown Community Fund will help them get closer to their goal.

The Optimist Clubs of York Region, as a collective, is one of more than 30 community organizations benefiting from this year's Community Fund.

With their share of the pot, the service club will help support school breakfast programs in the area, stock the shelves of local food pantry programs, and help students have what they need to succeed.

"Our mission is to provide hope and positive vision, that the Optimists bring out the best in our youth, our communities, and ourselves," says Sandra Watson, President of the Aurora Optimists. "We're proud to be one of 2,500 Optimist clubs throughout the world that reach more than 6 million young people every year. Together, we have fundraised and worked together on service projects that make lives better for so many ? and we have fun doing it!"

"With this year's [support from the Hoedown fund] we have started to see many more requests come through to support youth mental health area where we would like to continue to offer support.

"We also initiated a new program last year called The K.I.N.D. Program (Kids in Need Delivered] and this evolved through our relationships with the elementary schools in the area where we support their healthy snacks program. Unfortunately, there are still kids who arrive at school who may not have a backpack or they have lost their mittens or their pencil case. Even a pair of boots or a snowsuit. This is where we can come in and, through our connections with either the guidance counsellor or the teacher, they reach out and let us know there is a kid in need, we go out and buy the requested items, and deliver it to the school no questions asked."

Since the inception of the program, they have had requests ranging from a humble water bottle to, in one case, a child who needed a

new pair of shoes and a snowsuit.

?We were happy to be able to jump in and provide those items to the kids,? says Watson.

As the affordability and housing crises continue, more families are struggling but Watson is hesitant to predict whether there will be an increase in demand once schools re-open their doors and families assess what is needed. In any event, the Optimists are setting aside money in their budget to ensure the K.I.N.D. Project goes on with little impact.

This is sometimes easier said than done as so many service clubs lost opportunities to raise funds over the course of the pandemic. The grant from the Hoedown fund has helped keep programs at full speed, but the club has spent the last several months hitting the ground running, providing meals and snacks at community events for nominal fees in order to support local youth.

?One of our biggest fundraising tools is our mobile kitchen and, unfortunately, over the pandemic we weren't able to have that kitchen out in the community and that really hindered our fundraising abilities,? says Watson. ?But now we're definitely starting to see an uptake in the requests for our mobile kitchen, which is fabulous.

?If anyone does have a need for a special event where they need a barbecue for 100-plus people, I would encourage them to reach out to us and see if we can offer to help.?

To connect with the Optimist Club of Aurora, visit auroraoptimist.com.

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter