

Portraits of Giving honours behind-the-scenes community leaders



By Brock Weir

As a Grade 11 student at Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School, Kelly Graham helped lay the groundwork for a project which has the potential to save countless lives across Ontario.

Something for Sarah, a bone-marrow drive honouring the late Sarah Watkin, who lost her life to leukemia, exceeded the wildest expectations of Williams' Peer Mentors and when that founding class graduated to their post-secondary careers, they were thrilled their legacy was going to live on after expanding to all York Region high schools.

It is this legacy that is celebrated along with Ms. Graham in the 2017 Portraits of Giving Exhibition.

Portraits of Giving, now in its eighth year, is the brainchild of Richmond Hill photographer Karen Merk, who wanted to shine a light on York Region's unsung heroes through her evocative black and white portraits and stories written by local writers.

This year's exhibition, which honours 12 outstanding individuals from all corners of York Region, was formally opened Thursday night at Pfaff Automotive in Newmarket.

"These people take the time out of their busy lives to give back to their community," said Ms. Merk. "We really hope that exploring the stories behind the portraits will inspire you to continue giving back. We are definitely inspired."

So too was Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who sent a video message to the opening.

"Thank you to Karen Merk for creating this wonderful event and congratulations on bringing it into its eighth year," said Trudeau.

"Congratulations to all the honourees – business leaders, firefighters, police officers and so many others. You all give so much to your communities here in York Region and inspire us all to work harder to bring positive change to our world. As Canada turns 150 this year, it is a great time to celebrate people like you who take such good care of their communities and help make Canada such a great place to live."

Each portrait was taken in a location near and dear to the subject's heart. Ms. Graham's portrait, for instance, was taken in front of a bank of lockers at Williams where her volunteering journey began with the school's Peer Mentor program, as well as their Terry Fox Run and Me to We initiatives. Thanks to the efforts of Kelly and her teammates, the bone marrow drive not only expanded to all 31 of York Region's high schools, but netted 2,800 names being added to the National Bone Marrow registry, "with every name represented a possible life saved."

"It is a huge honour," says Kelly, who just wrapped up her first year at the University of Western Ontario with plans to transfer to the University of Toronto this fall. "This project is something I did in Grade 11, carried through Grade 12, and I know the students at Williams are still doing it. It was really nice to get the recognition for it and also some publicity for the event. It is amazing it is still ongoing and it is nice to see that other students at Williams are feeling the same effects I felt in Peer Mentors and being pushed by Mr. Fuller to continue to do great things."

Ms. Graham, who hopes one day to work for the United Nations or World Health Organization, said she is looking to get more involved with Canadian Blood Services as she continues her post-secondary career.

"The main thing I was excited for coming here tonight was seeing the other nominees," she said. "It is amazing being so young and

seeing people who continue volunteering throughout their entire adult life. It is inspiring to see so many people with families and full-time jobs continue to make such an impact in their communities.?

One such inspiration was fellow Aurora resident Robin Taylor-Smith, who was recognized for her work with the Optimist Club of Aurora, Aurora Chamber of Commerce, the Southlake Hospital Foundation, the Canadian Cancer Society and Belinda's Place.

?I was very honoured, overwhelmed and sure there are people who do more than I do ? but thanks a lot!? says Ms. Taylor-Smith of what went through her mind when asked by Ms. Merk to be a part of the project.

Her portrait was taken along the west fence of Town Park where so many of her activities with the Optimists take place.

?It is really great honour because a lot of the people who have been involved in Portraits of Giving over the past eight years have been really deserving and I think Karen Merk does an excellent job of putting this event together and bringing something to light, what everybody should know of the people who are working hard in their community for them.

?[What I want people to take away from this is] by volunteering you're not only giving back to the community, you're giving back to yourself. It is a huge sense of satisfaction and I hope that people can see that we can all do the same thing; you can join a committee, you can start and do something small and work to something larger, or just do it to the extent that you want to do it. But, giving back to the community is very important to the wellbeing of everyone.?

Portraits of Giving will be on display in the Great Hall at the Region of York Headquarters May 1 ? 5. The exhibition arrives at the Skylight Gallery at Aurora Town Hall from May 30 ? June 6, before concluding its tour at the King Township Museum from November 25 through December 16.