

St. Max art students pay it forward for kids in need



By Brock Weir

As passionate art students, the power of art on young minds is not lost on the Art Council at St. Maximilian Kolbe Catholic High School and now, as the school year draws to a close, they could just be paving the way for the artists of tomorrow.

Members of the Arts Council, along with representatives from Big Brothers Big Sisters of York (BBBSY), gathered at the Aurora Cultural Centre on Thursday to come 'full circle' and 'pay it forward' for the organization which hosts their Grade 12 art exhibition each winter.

Presenting money raised during their school's 'civvies day' which, for a fee to their student council, allows St. Max teens to ditch their uniforms for their own clothes during the day, they are helping to send six kids with Big Brothers Big Sisters of York to art camps at the Centre this summer.

'A lot of people were wondering where the money goes and we wanted to prove we could do something with the money and not just give back [to initiatives] within our own school community, but the whole Aurora community,' says Natalia Morales Caceres of the St. Max Art Council. 'It is really important to us that we give arts opportunities to those who might not be able to [attend]. The passion for art comes through at a very young age and we wanted to give back to that.'

Fellow Council member Jeruby Retnakanthan says members of the group always knew these arts programs were available in the community, but until it was brought up at one of their meetings, they didn't really realise that camp opportunities might be just out of reach for some.

'We wanted to put the money to good use,' she says.

Adds Lishya Liu: 'It is great to know that young kids are already starting to feel involved in the art community and I think it is really great to know how we can support them, and those who are struggling, to encourage them to continue art in their life. It is therapeutic in a way, really calming, and it is nice to develop that sense.'

Indeed, while these kids might be 'starting' in the art community, their enthusiasm is fully developed. According to Cara Dyke of BBBSY, when these six opportunities were made possible by the students, she immediately put them out in an email to their clients and their response was swift.

'Whenever we have had arts camps in the past, the parents are so happy because there are not a lot of arts opportunities for their

children because it is pretty pricy," she says. "When they have free ones, they are all over it. Any opportunity we can provide for our kids in addition to the mentoring programs we give them is above and beyond what parents are expecting, so we always welcome those kinds of opportunities."

Sarah Dame, Executive Director of BBBSY, said she feels "thankful, blessed and excited" at the students' initiative.

"Our kids just don't have the opportunities a lot of other kids do," says Ms. Dame. "It gives you chills because you hear the feedback after an experience like this and they just wouldn't have had it otherwise. Funding arts is just such a gift because there aren't as many opportunities, particularly for families with financial barriers, so we are excited!"

A similar view is offered by Laura Schembri, Executive Director of the Aurora Cultural Centre, who says it is a "powerful indication of students displaying an impressive collection of character traits: philanthropy, youth engagement, community empowerment, awareness, and empathy about the needs of those in our community."

"It is also full circle for our high school art program," she says. "Through their new experiences exhibiting their work in the Centre's galleries, these students expressed a wish to pass on the joy of making art to other young people. We are proud of their accomplishments and thank them for their civic involvement."