

Strong Play is well-rounded, educational avenue for children

Six years ago, the dream began.

Volunteers for Strong Play, Adib Razavi and Alexander Arthur, always had a sentimental idea of running a not-for-profit service to support families in need.

Initially, the service was intended to be solely in-person. However, a few years back, both highly driven individuals formulated an idea, predicated on providing a virtual service. Fast-forward to last year, when the global pandemic began, the virtual idea became the focal point.

Strong Play became a program to provide youth education in sports, technology and the arts.

"We wanted to be able to provide programming for youth in athletics and technology and anything related to enhance their knowledge and anything in the Canadian culture," Razavi said.

Receiving help from Canadian Red Cross, Strong Play was a successful project this summer. Offered in six-, eight- or 12-week sessions, Strong Play served 820 youth across the Greater Toronto Area.

Technology-based classes such as coding, 3D design, digital imaging, graphic design and financial literacy courses taught students everyday essentials. It also offered virtual coaching in soccer, basketball and dance. All of these meet mental health standards and needs for youth and some education on the COVID-19 virus.

"We've been able to design all of these programs with community partnerships in mind as well. A lot of parents have given us feedback on what has been useful in the past," Arthur said.

"The beautiful thing about Strong Play and having these programs for free and running them through Canadian Red Cross is we're able to bring programs that would otherwise be premium programs to anyone with access to a computer."

Students were provided with equipment this summer as per the grant from Canadian Red Cross. Parents had the availability to pick up the items before anything began.

As for students without access to technology, in-person holiday camps were available all summer.

Both Razavi and Arthur contacted 412 schools across the Toronto District School Board and York Region District School Board, 31 community centres, six MPs and over 30 private organizations to notify citizens.

Plenty of children in Aurora and Richmond Hill were enrolled, and the plan is to continue to expand beyond the city and York Region.

Razavi said the beautiful thing COVID has brought to us is the limitless virtual opportunities. Strong Play, Arthur added, hopes to reach out to other regions including Peel and Simcoe, as well as other provinces and internationally.

"Right now, we're in the process, hopefully, with the numbers going down we want to have a location up north. Maybe even Lake Simcoe or Newmarket," Razavi said.

And the program will look to expand to offer services to seniors. Services such as delivering groceries are being considered for seniors who need assistance with that this summer.

For those interested in enrolling their child for Strong Play this upcoming summer, head to strongplay.ca for more information.

You may contact Razavi and Arthur directly as well. To reach them, please email info.strongplay@gmail.com.

By Robert Belardi