

Stuffing purses for ?sisters? spurs humanitarian mission



By Brock Weir

How much thought did you give to putting on your socks this morning?

Unless you were trying to pick up the perfect statement sock for your Christmas party, chances are slipping them over your feet is so routine you barely remember.

For some in our community, however, putting on a fresh pair of newly laundered socks is something of a memory as they navigate another winter on the streets, but Grade 11 students at Dr. G.W. Williams this week are hoping to bring that feeling back to hundreds of people across York Region.

As The Auroran went to press this week, the students were inching closer to their goal of collecting 700 pairs of new socks to be distributed to area homeless by local social worker Angel Freedman.

The sock drive, which has grown to encompass the whole school was born out of a highly successful purse collection drive earlier this month entitled 'Stuff A Purse for a Sister,' a drive which has also helped lay the groundwork for some great initiatives ahead.

As a teacher, Lisa Shillum tries to instill in her students an 'empathy.' Over the past few weeks, she says with pride that the students in her Grade 11 Introduction to Sociology, Anthropology and Psychology Class have risen to the occasion.

'Ms. Shillum said she heard about a campaign called Let's Fill a Purse for a Sister, which is run by Angel Freedman,' explains student Lyndsay Breedon. 'It's a great campaign and when she suggested it our class liked the idea and we decided to take it on, singly, just our class. Without going through the whole school we raised 33 purses.'

Their drive, which typically collected underused purses from home, was augmented by donations from teachers, and they were subsequently filled with just about everything one might find in a women's purse, from the everyday toiletries to scarves, socks, hats and mitts, to magazines and books.

'We all know there is homelessness and it is heartbreaking for all of us, but when you're collecting toiletries you realise how much you're taking for granted,' says student Lauren Jirik. 'Collecting this and donating all of this has made us realise how lucky we are to have common things when there are many people out there who don't have the ability to get them.'

Adds Jordan Bondarewski: 'The outcome of this has really boosted our confidence to start something else because we had the confidence we could make a difference in the community. Even though we are told from such a young age that, yes, we can make a difference in the world, you don't really notice that until you try to do something. By trying to fill the purses, we realised how many women we can actually help.'

Inspired by their own success, they brainstormed ways to ramp up their efforts.

Enter the sock drive.

Socks, says Lyndsay, might seem like a 'childish' thing to collect, but collecting and distributing them to people in need can have a huge impact. Citing health problems, like trench foot, encountered due to the damp and dirty conditions on the front during the First World War, she says people are once again suffering those ill effects and fresh socks can go a long way.

'Angel let us know that the biggest problem homeless people have is with their feet and how [a lack of clean socks] can cause lots of health issues,' says Lauren. 'We thought socks were a very important necessity. We have a goal of 700 socks and we think if everyone in our school could bring in one pair we can meet our goal' and it helps you can usually get socks in big packs of six or ten.'

When The Auroran visited Williams last week, they were nearly halfway to their ultimate goal, anticipating a deluge to come in through the home stretch as awareness spreads through their halls.

With the drive set to conclude this week, and the results set to be distributed by Ms. Freedman, the students are not content to rest on any future laurel. They are keeping the momentum' and their energy going by forming the Wildcats Humanitarian Committee, which aims to turn these philanthropic endeavours into a school-wide norm, hitting the ground running in the New Year.

'I am really excited about it because I think my role as a teacher is to help develop their social conscience,' says Ms. Shillum. 'I am excited they are actually thinking about the societal issues in our own community and thinking about how they can get involved and working on their empathy. Empathy is a big piece of being a positive member of society and they are putting that empathy piece in action.'