

VIEW FROM QUEEN'S PARK: Meet Matthew Acheson

By Chris Ballard, MPP
Newmarket-Aurora

For the past several weeks, I have been pleased to host a co-op student in my constituency office. This week I am turning my column over to Matthew to report on the work he has been doing on behalf of the residents of Newmarket-Aurora.

Hello, my name is Matthew Acheson.

I attend St. Maximilian Kolbe Catholic High School in Aurora. For the past six weeks I have been doing my co-op placement in MPP Chris Ballard's constituency office.

I have enjoyed myself a lot so far between the outings and helping organize events.

In my first week, I helped put a presentation together for the Leading Women Leading Girls awards ceremony. While putting together the biographies, I realized what amazing work the women being recognized at the ceremony do and have done in the area. Chris ? he doesn't mind me calling him by his first name ? spends four days per week at Queen's Park and one day per week in the constituency office. I have gotten a chance to get to know him better and discuss important ideas about teens and the community. Throughout this co-op, I have learned many skills that are necessary to work in the political environment. For example, I need the ability to communicate with others on ideas that are not commonly understood. I need the ability to think fast if I have a caller who is very angry, and I have to help calm them down. Then there are times when people phone about problems they have and end up venting their frustration; all the while I'm trying to help resolve their problem or find someone who can. Then there's also perseverance for when I'm trying to get Chris speaking opportunities to discuss government initiatives, funding grants and other important issues.

Things like these have helped me be successful in his office and helped me understand what it is like to work for the Ontario government and its people. This co-op has given me an opportunity to make connections that would have otherwise been impossible. The people I have met are great and the things they have done are impressive. For example, there is a girl in Grade 10 that attends my school who has started her own charity to help people with Alzheimer's. The goal of the charity is to buy stuffed dogs and give them to people with Alzheimer's as therapy dogs. This helps people because it gives them a sense of joy and helps them deal with anxiety.

Chris and I got a chance to talk during my first week and he gave me an insight into his life, how he got to where he is now and how his life has taken some turns for the better. I also learned that Chris's son is a sergeant and instructor at the local Canadian Armed Forces base where my friend is doing a military reserves co-op. It is amazing how people can do so much for so many. It blows my mind the amount of people who come to Chris's office to discuss their issues and how people come to him because he is the Minister of Environment and Climate Change.

As great as it is to see the work we do in the community, there are also the quiet times, like all jobs. During those quiet times I do simple work like put pins in cards that are given out during events. That has to be the most mind-boring job I have had. I believe I did 200 pins in 3 hours at one point but somebody has to do it! As slow as the office can be at times, it can also get very busy. There have been times where we have had meeting after meeting until I have to leave, and I know more meetings are scheduled. These days are very hectic around the office and are usually full of running around and lots of driving.

Aside from the busyness of the office, the people who work alongside me are fantastic. There is Cleo, Trish, Rohit, and my manager Cathy. All four of these people have been incredible at making me feel welcome into the office and have given me plenty of advice and support with adjusting to office life. For me, it is a lot more comfortable to be in an office setting than a school setting. Scratch that, any place is better than a school setting.

Last week I think was my favourite because I got to go with Chris down to Queens Park to watch Question Period. While I was there, it was amusing to watch the two opposition parties take ?shots? at the government and see the government ministers stand strong on their positions. After Question Period, I got to take a tour of the building where I learned more about the rich history embedded within. The past several weeks have given me a chance to really experience what it is like to work for and with a Member of Provincial Parliament.

Did you know ? that Saint Maximilian Kolbe Catholic High School was named after a priest killed in Auschwitz during the Second World War. As the high school was opening a group of students travelled to visit with Father Lucjan (a priest who served with

Kolbe) to learn more about the school's patron saint. The following week, a different group travelled to New York City to participate in a workshop at the Museum of Tolerance, funded by the Simon Weisenthal center for Holocaust Studies. Finally a third group travelled to Poland to follow in the steps of Saint Maximilian Kolbe including visiting the City of the Immaculata in Warsaw and Auschwitz outside of Kracow. All of these experiences have helped lay the foundation and culture of acceptance and inclusion for everyone in the school.