

Area homeless to reap benefits of students? ?Second Harvest?



By Brock Weir

It's a familiar scene to so many students across Ontario at midterm ? the realisation you need to get those last few community service hours before graduating high school.

Some might find opportunities in their comfort zone, but others might want to step outside the box and find out something about themselves.

Ian, a student in his mid-teens, chose the latter option, finding himself serving the homeless in a soup kitchen and, in turn, finding out a lot more about the plight of those struggling on the streets.

When students in Pickering College's middle school began studying Ian's story through the world created by Eric Walters in his novel ?Shattered? many years ago, they began a similar journey, bringing home lessons which continue to bear fruit to this day.

?I realised homelessness is a growing issue and it is not only in certain countries, but right here at home,? says Emma Kerswill, a Grade 7 student. ?We don't search to see if there is homelessness around us, yet we know it is there. Having the ability to really dig deep into it is very eye opening. There are so many reasons [for homelessness] like alcohol and drug use, to family issues to money problems.?

Their journey to find the root causes of homelessness is not purely academic. Putting what they've learned into motion, the students embarked this week on their annual food drive for Second Harvest, a Toronto based ?food rescue? program which operates similarly to a food bank, but provides fresh vegetables, fruit and meat to food banks, soup kitchens, and church dinners to provide heartier meals for those who need them most.

Second Harvest features prominently in ?Shattered? and they made the connection through their research.

?At Pickering, we're really focused on relationships,? says teacher Elaine Kliem. ?It is important for us to understand and find that understanding by peeling back layers and really diving into the hard issues. Looking at homelessness, what empathy is to them, what homelessness is to them, stereotypes they might have, is a really hard look for them because you do have to be honest about it and

look where your heart sits on an issue and try to find a deeper understanding within that.

“Then you can look at] how you can impact that, change a viewpoint, or just understand another human being.”

Sometimes, finding that understanding can be a little bit overwhelming, according to Ms. Kliem. Students, for instance, are typically uncomfortable hearing words like “worthless”, and even “uneducated” bandied about when it comes to phrases some feel are synonymous with homelessness. Through their work, they have found this couldn't be further from the truth and the idea that their perceptions are not always right is truly underscored.

So far, officials with Second Harvest have been “overwhelmed” with the amount Pickering College students bring in year after year. Although the program started with Grade 7s, those who have graduated through further grades continue the connection with the charity, so Second Harvest is able to reap more and more with each passing season.

As they head out this week with their grocery bags in hand, encourage other students to follow their leads, all in the name of filling up dozens of cardboard boxes to load up bound for Second Harvest ahead of the holidays, the initiative has also sown the seeds of wanting to do more.

“Helping out in the community is just such an important thing, but it is only a little step to donate something,” says student Celine Barratt. “What I like about our school is we go past that, whether it is here or whether it is in a different country. [As sponsors of an African girl named] Margaret, instead of giving her a donation just once a year, we help her all year round. It makes me feel happy to provide opportunities where we know where it is going.”

That is a view shared by fellow student Adam Murphy, who provides a perspective to drive the point home.

“We sponsored her and she went to school, but she wasn't exactly homeless,” he explains. “Her house had mud walls, dirt, straw, and leaves and her entire family all slept in one bed. They didn't have actual houses like we do to keep us warm when it is cold, that protect us from the rain that is falling, and she had to walk to get water instead of us just turning on a tap.”

Adds Emma: “We know we're making a difference in one girl's life and it might not seem like a lot, but to me, you actually make a difference because it is the first time she has ever had three meals a day, it is the first time she has ever had her own bed.”

Food collected by Pickering College students last year provided over 700 meals through Second Harvest, says Ms. Kliem. Items on their wish list this year include potatoes, sweet potatoes, onions, squash, carrots, turnips, apples, pears, and anything you can dream of to serve alongside a traditional turkey dinner.