

Area students SPARC solutions to community challenges



Area students have gone beyond the classroom and into the community to ?SPARC? real change at Pickering College.

Students at the Newmarket-based independent school recently celebrated a second year of success for their SPARC ? Student Projects Advancing Real Change ? where students work in groups forging community partnerships to have a real impact.

Areas explored by students in this latest term included technology, robotics and coding, social justice and advocacy, identity and community, environmental stewardship, and designing for now and the future.

At the celebration, SPARC students welcomed community partners to thank them for their support and to outline how their work together fostered change.

One such organization was the Canadian National Institute for the Blind, which helped students Becca and Just learn the importance of empathy in designing products for people living with various challenges.

?To understand our partner better, we visited CNIB and learned directly from people who are blind,? said Just. ?We also went to Onoir Toronto, a restaurant where you eat in complete darkness. This experience helped us understand how much we rely on our vision and how challenging everyday tasks can be without sight. These activities helped us design with empathy.

?Together, our projects showed creativity, problem solving and empathy. Some groups focused on tools, others on learning materials, and others on awareness. Even though our projects were different, they all connected to the same goal: making the world easier to navigate for people who are blind or have low vision. Throughout this project, we learned how important empathy is in design. We learned to listen to each other, ask helpful questions, and use feedback from CNIB and our teachers to make our work better. Working together helped us grow as designers and collaborators.?

Another group, this time in the coding and robotics category, used their skills to target scams, particularly those aimed at seniors.

?All over the world, elders are being scammed and losing money through electronic communication,? said Tyler. ?This is a serious problem that affects many families and communities. Scammers love to disguise their scams well. They usually have messages saying, ?Hey, you just won a free trip,? and ask you for your credit card information. They will not tell you their name if you ask them otherwise, you would probably realize it is a scam immediately.?

This group created a series of interactive games to teach people about cybersecurity.

“We worked in groups of two or three to make a game on a block coding platform called Scratch,” said Ryan. “We worked with the Wise Ones, our group of local older adults, to brainstorm a game that would not only be appealing but also fun. We interviewed the Wise Ones a couple of times to ask about their experience with cyberattacks and what they would do in that situation. This makes it easier for us to impart their knowledge into our game. Through this project, we built meaningful relationships with the Wise Ones and their help was invaluable in making our games both educational and effective.”

The importance of social justice and advocacy was driven home to still more students as they partnered with Newmarket's Mission Thrift Store to raise awareness about “fast fashion,” its impact on the environment, workers and society.

“We chose this topic because almost everyone participates in fast fashion, often without realizing the harm behind cheap and trendy clothing,” said Daisy. “Through this project, we wanted to help people understand these issues better and inspire more thoughtful and responsible choices when it comes to what we wear.”

Added Chloe: “At the beginning of this project, we first learned what fast fashion is and explored the many problems it causes, such as overconsumption, pollution, landfill waste, and unfair labour practices. Many students were truly shocked and inspired by what we discovered, which motivated us to take real action instead of just learning about it in class.”

The group's final project saw students working in groups such as The Jean Dream Team, Style & Stitch, Runway Rebels, Handmade and Reclaimed, and The Fashion Fixers, to transform old and discarded clothing into something “new, creative and meaningful.”

“The Jean Dream Team turned old jeans into fresh, stylish pieces, showing how reusing denim can give clothing a second life,” said Daisy. “The Style & Stitch team created clothing entirely from scratch, using recycled and discarded fabric, proving that sustainability and style can go hand-in-hand.”

“The Runway Rebels created an impactful statement piece that goes beyond fashion,” continued Chloe. “Their work represents advocacy, drawing attention to overconsumption, waste, and fair labour practices. Their design shows that clothing can be a powerful way to send a message. The Fashion Fixers rescued damaged clothing and redesigned it into stuffed animals, showing that even clothes that seem ruined can be transformed into something meaningful.” Finally, the Handmade and Reclaimed team turned fabric scraps into accessories like scrunchies and tote bags, remind us that even the smallest pieces of material can have a big impact.”

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