

Aurora teens to receive silver Duke of Edinburgh Awards this weekend



By Brock Weir

Canoeing down a remote river, Tara Stipeć was struck by the eerie feeling of being almost alone, in the middle of nowhere, with absolutely nothing man-made in her line of sight.

It was a moment of reflection for the Aurora resident, and student at Country Day School, in her otherwise very busy life.

Tara was canoeing with fellow students up in Temagami, completing her "adventurous journey" for the Duke of Edinburgh Awards.

The Duke of Edinburgh Awards were founded by Prince Philip in 1956 as a way to get students outdoors, out of their comfort zones, and into the communities to find their sense of self. The awards program expanded throughout the Commonwealth, arriving in Canada in 1964, and this weekend, Tara will be at Queen's Park to receive her Silver Award from Lieutenant-Governor David Onley, the Queen's Representative in Ontario.

"It is so worth it," says Tara of participating in the Duke of Ed. "It doesn't really matter as much about the award as how much of a better person it will make you. It will make you do things you are not comfortable with and it will push you outside your comfort zone."

Tara was actually granted her Silver Award last year, but Saturday's ceremony will be the first opportunity she has had to formally receive it. In the intervening time, she has worked hard and is nearly finished working towards the next level, the Gold Award.

Throughout her history with the Duke of Ed, Tara has completed extensive volunteer work at Country Day School, has done stints as a camp counsellor for the Town of Aurora, helped to organize charity fashion shows within her school, and faced down Mother Nature in Temagami.

Recently, she has taken up a volunteer position with Newmarket-Aurora's Special Olympics swim club, the Special Ducks.

"It makes my day every time that I go," she says. "I usually go just once a week and it is amazing how something so little can make you so happy. There are kids who come once a week to do their swimming and it makes their day, they get to see all their friends, and it is just amazing."

Working towards her Gold Award, the journey has taken her and some of her fellow classmates to Kenya, where they helped build new classrooms and a kitchen for a school, but also to delve into the surrounding community and meet the people.

“Before I went, I had this mindset that these people had nothing and they would be very sad,” says Tara. “But, when you drive out into this community in the middle of nowhere, I found they are just the happiest people I have ever met in my life. We did a water walk with them and they have to walk a really long way to get water.”

They also had the opportunity to visit their homes, where they were struck by homes often having eight people in a clay hut sharing one bed, and one tiny stove, but it also helped underscore the importance in which they hold their education.

“For them, it is a really big deal to go to school,” she says. “They love school so much and they are so happy to be there and work really, really hard. Once they get to high school, they actually have to pay to go into high school. The trip was a blessing and after the trip I really appreciate school and learning so much more. Now, I don't feel like it is a burden to do homework and I am really excited to be able to learn.”

And, through the Duke of Ed, she has learned quite a bit about herself in the process.

“I learned I like a lot of balance in my life and I need a lot of things to keep me busy in order to keep me going,” she says. “If I have spaces in my calendar, I don't really like that because it makes me procrastinate, but if I have stuff to do and a list of things, I have to go play field hockey one day, I am going to volunteer this other day, it just keeps me going and I always love being busy.”

Tara will receive her award alongside fellow Aurora student Maggie Riehle. For more on Maggie and her achievements watch for next week's edition of The Auroran.