

Breaking down medical barriers, fostering equity drive Give Back Award winners



Multiple factors drive people to give back to the world around them, but one common denominator is a drive to foster equity in the communities they call home.

This is particularly true for Grade 12 students from across York Region who were recently awarded the 2024 Give Back Award by Neighbourhood Network and Magna International.

Aryanna Moolla, a student at Aurora's Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School is preparing to embark on a post-secondary career in biomedical sciences with an eye on dismantling health inequities and their impact on patient outcomes.

While it may seem like our universal healthcare system in Canada addresses these issues, disparities exist across Indigenous and immigrant health, mental health/addiction services, and socioeconomic status, says Aryanna. My volunteer work has provided the tools to continue fostering equity in the medical field I choose to pursue. My empathy, compassion, and emotional involvement in this issue stem from my high school experiences, aligning with my lifelong commitment to make a positive impact.

Within the walls of her Aurora school and the broader community, she cites her work organizing a local menstrual product drive for Blue Door Shelter as amongst her most fulfilling work.

With a passion for improving healthcare access, I identified with this issue as a female student. After having completed research about period poverty in Canada, I pledged to make a difference in this national crisis in any way that I could, starting with my local community. While this project helped make a tangible difference in the lives of women at the shelter, it was also a fulfilling educational experience for those at my high school. Throughout the initiative, I made sure to push for education on women's healthcare access within my school, in order to demonstrate the impact and importance of the student donations.

Seeing this impact and passion only fuels her further and has benefited local food banks, the formation of her school's Muslim Students' Association, as well as one-on-one mentorship tutoring younger students.

Among this year's honourees were:

PRISHA BHAVSAR ? Stouffville District High School

Prisha epitomizes dedication and service to others through her impactful volunteer work. As a Student Trustee for the York Region

District School Board, she created workshops to support thousands of students from 33 different high schools who were impacted by pandemic-related learning loss. Prisha also serves as President of the Empowered Student Partnership and STEM Science Council, Chair of the Ontario Well Being Working Group to help students with physical and mental illness, is a STEM mentor, and volunteers at her local hospital. In addition to these efforts, Prisha founded the global initiative RedCycle to provide menstrual health resources and education to women in developing countries. She is planning to pursue studies in medicine, where she is committed to creating equitable women's health solutions and care for all.?

PARKER BARNARD ? Huron Heights Secondary School

?Parker's volunteer journey began at the hockey rink, where he was encouraged by his coaches to help as a referee, with timekeeping, and supporting young players at public skating events. As time went on, he realized that volunteering was not only helping others, but was enriching his own life. Parker believes that small acts of kindness are contagious. He supports his community by shoveling snow and raking leaves for local seniors and collecting food and coats for people experiencing homelessness. Parker also created a Youth Space group at his school to help bringing positivity and inclusivity to students. He will be studying Mechanical Engineering with the goal of developing innovative, sustainable solutions to improve lives and continue contributing meaningfully to society.?

NIKI ZAFAR HEIDARI ? Newmarket High School

?For Niki, giving back means using her resources to help create a more equitable world, amplifying the voices of those who are marginalized and disadvantaged. In her school and the broader community, she dedicates her time to educational outreach, leading initiatives like MedTalk and STEM Today where her medical and scientific research has been published. Niki also founded the non-profit organization Wise Owl Academy, bringing free education to students in need across the province and into developing nations. She is an active fundraiser and volunteer for Cancer Kids First, the York Region Food Network, and is editor for The Affair Magazine. Niki's diverse volunteer efforts reflect her deep-seated desire to have a meaningful impact on others.?

MICHELLE KELLY ? Dr. J.M. Denison Secondary School

?Volunteering has been integral to Michelle's life, and giving back is deeply ingrained in her values and life experiences. At her high school, Michelle launched their first VEX robotics club, serves on Student Council, and is a mentor in the Best Buddies Program. Her leadership extends to the community, where she supports Blue Door, Daily Bread Food Bank, the Heart and Stroke Foundation, and Southlake Regional Health Centre. Michelle also co-founded Animal Action, partnering with the OSPCA to donate and deliver 210,000 pounds of pet food during the pandemic ? including using drones to make deliveries in Northern Canada. Through her future studies in STEM, Michelle hopes to inspire young women, break down barriers, and serve as a role model for future generations.?

MATTHEW PILLING ? Sir William Mulock Secondary School

To Matthew, giving back to others is a fantastic way to invest in the well-being of a community. At school, he dedicates himself to various roles, from supporting sporting events and tutoring, to managing sound for school plays, and preserving school spirit through videography of different occasions. Matthew's support extends to the community, where he volunteers for Big Brothers Big Sisters of Peel York, helps at local clean up events, and notably, brings self-expression, joy, and empowerment to children facing medical challenges at Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital. For Matthew, giving back is about recognizing the opportunities he has received and working tirelessly to ensure others have access to similar benefits.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter