

Character Community launches podcast highlighting youth mental health

From social isolation to uncertainty over schools, COVID-19 has been a challenging time for youth ? and for youth experiencing mental health challenges, even more so.

But, within these challenges, are stories of resilience and overcoming obstacles; and they are the stories being uncovered by Aurora's Adam Vanderkolff in a new podcast series spearheaded by the Character Community Foundation.

The non-profit Character Community Foundation is dedicated to building a ?safe, inclusive and connected? York Region by helping to break down barriers and foster leadership roles. With new funding from the Ontario Trillium Foundation, they are broadening their reach by sharing these inspiring stories in new ways ? and integral to bringing them to life is Vanderkolff.

?Often kids have very important stories that they're not always comfortable bringing to the attention of others,? he says. ?This is a cool platform that allows kids to share their experiences where they otherwise wouldn't be able to do. It is very cool to hear what they have to say. Mental health is a very sensitive issue but it is also something that is very important to shed a light on. Often they are quite comfortable speaking openly, so it is more about just listening. A huge part of it is just to be able to listen and let them speak from their own perspective.?

The series launched with Vanderkolff speaking to Jenova Lin, a teen who, after being diagnosed with Tourette Syndrome in 2018 has become a passionate advocate for Tourette Canada.

?What strikes me having these conversations with these kids is how inspiring they are because a lot of them went through some really dark times and they are so young to be dealing with a lot of the issues they're dealing with now,? he says. ?Just the maturity and the courage they show coming out and speaking about these things ? I think the coolest thing is when they speak for the purpose of helping other kids.

?I remember being that age; you just don't think about things like that, so [their maturity] is really eye-opening and inspiring because there are things we can all do better. We have all had life experiences and there are always things that we can do better and make our community a more inclusive place for everyone. They're doing it and they're already facing challenges.?

Whether you access the podcast through your regular podcast providers, or watch them on YouTube, Vanderkolff says he hopes people not only listen but are inspired by the stories being shared.

?I think the thing we can really look at and get from this is for people to watch it and for them to feel inspired to help their community in any way they can. We also want kids to watch this. They are talking about cyberbullying, stress, anxiety and these are all super-real issues. It is so important for kids to see other kids talking openly about their situations and I think that is something we really, really want to promote: talking about these things.

?I know a lot of kids keep those feelings inside and it is something that is so important that we have open discussions about. We can go to teachers, parents, guidance counsellors, whoever we can to help. These are all things that have come up in discussions with every kid that I have talked to. What has really saved them is talking about it because that is when they hit their epiphany: that they can make their situation better for themselves when they speak to others about it. It is about really promoting an open conversation and being very open about what is going on in your life and what you can do to change it around.?

To view the podcast on YouTube, visit www.youtube.com/channel/UCvhJtjV--w6S2bmeIGWiPng.

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