

Community 're-connects' to help Syrian Refugees



By Brock Weir

As Terri-Anne Day absorbed people's reactions to the Syrian Refugee Crisis, she sensed a world around her that was becoming increasingly disconnected.

Social media might, in theory, keep people closer connected than ever before, but the personal interactions were a different story.

As she watched hordes of students, parents and neighbours bustling around her Aurora home on Friday, however, this disconnect seemed banished to memory, even for a moment, as they banded together to make a difference for newcomers to Canada.

Ms. Day spearheaded an initiative in her southwest Aurora community to collect winter clothing and other items to donate to New Circles, a Toronto-based non-profit that provides free new and gently used clothes, shoes and accessories to people in need, among many other services, now with a special focus on new arrivals from Syria.

From initially bouncing the ideas of members of her local book club and bike club, Ms. Day soon found herself at the helm of a project that 'snowballed' well beyond her expectations.

'I was surprised and shocked at the negativity I was hearing from people on the Syrian refugees,' says Ms. Day, maintaining eye contact. 'I told Mayor Dawe I was shocked, but not shocked, and said I wanted to do something. I felt people were just disconnected. Right around that time is what happened in Paris. When we looked at these terrorists, they were actual people like you and me, some of them from wealthy families. I saw they were disconnected, and I saw it in my own environment. You would think we are much more connected with technology, but you're not really deeply connected and you're not really feeling that sense with people.'

'The refugees are people like you and me. We have homes, families, mums and dads, children, and everything has been stripped from them. They have nothing. All we want is safety for our family, love, and a sense of meaningful life. I just wanted to do something.'

Looking for that something, she stumbled across New Circles and their mission to provide this help resonated with her.

Following her pitches to the book and bike clubs, she reached out to Aurora author and activist Marina Nemat, who lent her support for the cause, and then she contacted the local schools.

As a result, her home was teeming on Friday with students from Aurora Heights Public School, Cardinal Carter Catholic High School, Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School, and Light of Christ Catholic Elementary School, not to mention Mayor Dawe and

Ms. Nemat, all lending a helping hand to sort countless bags of clothes which the team delivered in shifts to New Circles this week.

In addition to the clothes donations taken in over the course of the campaign, Ms. Day and the other volunteers were heartened by the variety of contributions, including a donation of 50 brand new neck warmers and quilts made by a local sewing club, and from Victor, who was widowed in 2012, who felt this is where his late wife would have wanted her clothes to go.

'The turnout is great and this is a great idea,' said Mayor Dawe, standing among the bags of clothes. 'This is the right thing to do. We are pretty lucky here in Canada. We have an obligation, quite frankly, to support those who aren't as lucky.'

Given the success of this first initiative, Ms. Day says she feels this is now a community initiative that can be maintained well beyond this first donation of winter apparel.

The wheels are turning on possible new initiatives. If there was just someone in the Aurora community willing to donate warehouse space, Ms. Day says she would not be averse to trying her hand at laying the foundation here for a charity modelled on New Circles, which sets aside a few days a month for people in need to come and 'shop' for their necessities free of charge.

'Even though I initiated this, it has snowballed to the point where I really do feel the community has taken this on,' says Ms. Day. 'I suspect if it does move forward, it won't be my drive, it will be a community drive for sure. The premise for this was a clothing drive, but the secondary purpose is creating a platform for us to really connect again outside of the superficial 'Hi! How are you?' We get busy in our lives and forget what is really important. When you share, we find we are really not alone. Everyone is busy struggling with whatever it is they do. What you need to do is share, connect and you will see we're all in it together.'

For more information on New Circles, visit newcircles.ca.