

Conversation Circle helps newcomer kids ? with boost from Trillium Foundation

By Brock Weir

If you've ever been the new kid in class, you know how difficult it can be to find your feet in a new environment. But, put yourself in the shoes of a child in the same situation who is new to Canada, new to English, and struggling to find the words to forge ahead. The Conversation Circle, an initiative of Big Brothers Big Sisters of York, is hoping to help make that transition easier for newcomer youth.

Funded by the Ontario Trillium Foundation, the Big Brothers Big Sisters of York (BBBSY) program introduces newcomer youth to mentors ?who have a caring, flexible attitude and an interest in mentoring young people who are new to Canada.?

The program's mandate is to give youth the opportunity to practice English language skills ?in a safe, encouraging environment,? while improving self-esteem through positive relationships with mentors and other group members, while also promoting social integration in schools and the wider community.?

The program got a welcome boost from Trillium last week with the formal presentation of a \$104,000 grant which will help support over 100 kids here in York Region.

The presentation, which was also attended by Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill MPP Michael Parsa, took place in the middle of a pumpkin carving competition, but officials took some time out to share the benefits of the program.

?As coordinator of the Conversation Circle, I have had the opportunity to see the program out in the community,? said Devinder Hallan, BBBSY Program Coordinator responsible for Conversation Circle. ?We know we live in a diverse region that many newcomers are choosing as their new home. We have been working with several workers and different schools [in all nine municipalities] who have addressed the need and need a program like Conversation Circle. We have connected with them and many of these schools want our continued service and want us to come back with Conversation Circle because they have seen the growth of the participants and they see the need is there.

?We have seen the success. We have seen participants come in and not know certain activities and had the opportunity to try new ones ? and even different foods. We have had the opportunity to provide participants with different foods they have not been exposed to. We measure first how they are socially when they first come into the program and how they feel when they have ended the program. We do our own evaluation in terms of how they feel the program went for themselves. If there are any new things, that's how we learn.?

Sarah Dame, Executive Director of BBBSY, added while the organization performs evaluations and measure all outcomes of the programs, these outcomes in turn are all measured through the Ontario Trillium Foundation.

Following the formal presentation from the OTF, and determining the winners of the pumpkin carving competition, Ms. Dame held a meeting with Mr. Parsa to outline some of the needs facing Big Brothers Big Sisters of York. Before they went into the meeting, both shared their thoughts on opportunities.

?We just want the Premier, the Ministers and all the Members of Provincial Parliament, to know what we do and what is now an essential service in terms of mentoring and the impact,? said Ms. Dame. ?We're building thriving communities, we're not just a nice to have. The research tells us it is playing a role in the cycle of poverty. We're keeping kids engaged in school. There is so much research coming out of everywhere in terms of what mentoring means to children moving through and being successful. The Boston Consulting Group did our study for us and the social return on investment was 23-1.

?The reality for us is we are raising the bar in terms of the mentoring programs that we are doing. We are working more closely with our Toronto partner to provide the essential service and with the Premier and all of the Ministers in terms of working against violence. This is going to be a big thing moving forward and how we can keep kids in school and get more kids moving onto post-secondary education, it's all the things I think our Premier actually is really standing behind.?

Mr. Parsa said he was looking forward to chatting, noting he's familiar with BBBSY's programs and the importance they have in the community.

?We always talk about how early prevention is key to everything,? he said. ?The camaraderie that this kind of thing builds, the confidence it builds, I was an introvert when I was younger and very shy. It was through initiatives like this that allowed me to be able to make friends, to have the confidence to be able to share? when I had concerns, which later on becomes vital as you become an adult to be able to talk about things that you're not comfortable with it. The youth might be a small percentage of today, but they are 100 per cent of our future. We have to make sure we get it right.?

Ms. Dame agreed: ?The earlier the intervention, the better the pathway our kids are going to take.?