

Fashion forward students take to the runway to remember classmate



Fashion forward students take to the runway and remember classmate
By Brock Weir

Students at Aurora's ESC Renaissance, the French Catholic secondary school serving Aurora, King, and Richmond Hill near Bathurst and Bloomington, are getting fitted this week in designer duds.

This Saturday, the students will be strutting down the runway in Renaissance's Le Défilé pour l'espoir, the annual fundraising fashion show, which benefits a cause each year close to their hearts.

Often, the event is held to benefit cancer charities to honour those who have struggled with the disease within their school community, but students quickly changed focus after one tragic morning this past January when they lost one of their own.

In the early hours of Tuesday, January 14, Grade 12 student and Aurora resident Alexander Roy-Lachapelle lost his hard-fought battle with depression on the GO Tracks near St. John's Sideroad. His loss was one which deeply affected the school community and when it came to selecting a charity for this year's event, the Canadian Mental Health Association became an obvious choice.

?A lot of our thoughts went into this and we thought it was a good idea to have this event for Alex and his parents were really supportive of us,? says student Anny-Aysel Ineza. ?We are working hard to get people to come and shine a light on this and show that mental health is a serious problem. We know that Alex wasn't the only one. There are so many people in our school that we don't know have this problem.?

Whether or not they were aware of the prevalence of mental health issues in the community, the reality was brought home quickly with Alex's death. Aysel says the school suddenly became more aware and conscious about what people might be experiencing. Through this event, they hope to share this story and help other students who might be going through their own struggles by themselves and foster an understanding that the community is there for them.

For a time, Aysel shared an International Baccalaureate class with Alex, but Alex eventually took his studies in another direction. He was a good person, offering people rides after school, offering them money for meals, and stepping in to help in areas other people might not.

?He was shy, but this year he was really trying to fit with people, trying to talk with them during lunches and we really saw a big change in his behaviour,? she recalls. ?We would like to say we really thought he was going through progress. He was starting to

talk to everyone, was interested in making friends and wanted to get a little closer to everyone.?

Saturday's event has also brought the community closer together, garnering support in fashion from Aurora's 5 Below Jeans and More, as well as men's and children's fashions from Jack Jones and Carter's and Oshkosh Babies and Kids.

?The community has always been really helpful when we have this,? says Aysel. ?Jack Jones is letting us borrow some of the clothes for the boys who are going to be our models, some formal and some casual, and the kids already have their clothing. 5 Below Jeans and More has been very helpful and understanding, we're really feeling the support from the community and we think this is a really important event.

For Alex's parents Richard and Marsha, who will be in attendance on Saturday to speak about their son, it is paramount that the kids ? participants and attendees ? enjoy themselves.

?I am thinking about how I want to word my speech so it is not a downer in the sense I want there to be hope,? says Mr. Lachapelle. ?I don't want to go there and be Mr. Doom and Gloom, although the events that we have lived and are living are quite tragic. You still want to get the positive out of it and make people understand that this happened to us, it will happen to others afterwards, but you want to contribute something positive so when you save one child from depression or taking their life, that would be a victory.?

Richard and Marsha say ESC Renaissance has been very supportive of them and trying to help them through the tragedy as best they can. Last weekend, they held a memorial service for those in the Renaissance community they have lost and this Saturday, in their respective speeches, they hope to ?connect the dots? in Alex's story.

?It didn't happen overnight,? he says. ?He had been dealing with depression for what we noticed about 18 months. We had gone to several hospitals and there had been four instances where he fled home. When we woke up that Tuesday morning, we weren't entirely surprised that he wasn't there. It was more that we had to put in a plan and try to find him. As I said during my grief therapy, we went through 18 months of hell and now we are in a fresh, different kind of hell.?

Throughout his struggle, Alex's parents tried to help as best they could with psychologists, although those specializing in adolescents, he says, were harder to come by.

?It did take us some time before we were able to get psychological services for Alex,? says Richard. ?It was only after the last hospitalization that we finally did get bumped up the queue. Prior to that, it was difficult to get the good services and I don't know why. Did the people not see the urgency? Did we not see the urgency? There are a lot of ifs.?

For teens who might be living with depression, he urges them that if they are feeling anxious to speak to parents or school counsellors about what they are experiencing.

?Don't let it all bottle up inside,? he says.

Tickets are on sale now for Saturday's Fashion Show for \$15 by calling ESC Renaissance at 905-727-4631. A limited number of tickets for \$20 will also be available at the door. The school is located at 700 Bloomington Road West. For more information, visit esr.csdccs.edu.on.ca.