

Give Back Award winners logged nearly 9,000 volunteer hours



By Brock Weir

As an elementary school student, Melika Parsamanesh noticed one of her friends was having a particularly difficult time in life.

She needed help in school and Melika took it upon herself to tutor her. Her friend was grateful and she flourished but it planted the seed in Melika that giving back was her way forward in life.

Since then, her volunteerism has taken her from tutoring in after school programs and educational centres, to hours at Mackenzie Health in Richmond Hill, to volunteering in a hospital in Shiraz, Iran and, last Thursday, to Magna Headquarters where the Grade 12 Student from Cardinal Carter Secondary School joined 19 of her peers from across York Region as recipients of the 2016 Give Back Awards founded by Magna International.

‘This is an honour for me because it is a way of appreciating what we do as volunteers,’ says Melika, who has logged 1,852 volunteer hours. ‘Giving back, to me, is a way of thanking God for the wonderful gift he has given us and is a way of helping those who are less fortunate and in need.’

A native of Iran and a Farsi speaker, Melika has seen her volunteerism kick up a notch since Canada began accepting Syrian Refugees. It is very important work for her, and work she hopes to continue this fall as a health sciences student at the University of Ottawa, where her ultimate goal is joining Doctors Without Borders after medical school.

The Give Back Awards were founded by Belinda Stronach while MP for Newmarket-Aurora. The program has since continued under the umbrella of Magna International, Magna for Community, and Neighbourhood Network, and has grown beyond Aurora and Newmarket to most of northern York Region.

The awards were handed out at Magna's Aurora headquarters at the height of National Volunteer Week. Speaking to the recipients award-winning humanitarian Joan Walker, wife of Magna CEO Don Walker, said recognition during National Volunteer Week represents ‘the heavy load’ volunteers carry throughout the year.

‘When I was reading over your stories, I really couldn't help but reflect back on what the heck I was doing at your age,’ said Ms. Walker, who is set to receive the Mother Teresa Award from Athol Murray College of Notre Dame for her humanitarian work in Mozambique. ‘I know I was into sports, I was into school, I was into boys, and just basically hanging out with my friends. Volunteerism was nowhere on my radar. I realised you guys are absolutely leaps and bounds way ahead of the game in terms of maturity, looking at the big picture in life, and doing the right thing.’

?Purpose is what drives us. I think it is essential in life and, in volunteerism, to have purpose and to be optimistic, hardworking, moral and thoughtful and to always be thinking about the greater good is what all of you have been doing and that is why we are here tonight. There is no stopping what you can accomplish now that you have got that momentum behind you and you should all feel very, very proud.?

Ms. Walker hailed the 20 recipients as ?true leaders? but added that is not something you learn in school. While you might get it from a great teacher, parents, or role models, it is ultimately something that comes from inside you, she said.

?It is from your heart, like a mark of your true character,? she said. ?It is a sign of courage, it is a sign of conviction and I'm very happy to see you all have made such good choices with how you have chosen to spend your time and energy.?

Kelly Graham, a Grade 12 student at Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School, knows all too well the sign of courage. Kelly was recognized, in part, for her work in the school's bone marrow registration drive, which has become something of a tradition at Williams in recent years.

It was founded by the school's peer mentors in honour of Sarah Watkin, who was battling leukemia when the school took on the challenge. Sadly, Sarah lost her battle, but the students continue to carry the torch.

?Adding 3,000 names to the Bone Marrow Donor Registry was huge for me, doing it in honour of Sarah who was seven when she passed away,? said Kelly. ?Being able to honour her and her family in that way, when you're potentially saving more lives, is something that I am very proud of.?

The students are gearing up for another drive next month, and the graduating peer mentors like Kelly are ?thrilled? younger students are going to continue their efforts, she said.

For some students, volunteering for others has helped them learn more about themselves. Danika Bertrand of ESC Renaissance said when she was younger she was looking for a way to stand out and, through volunteerism, she discovered that was through her creative side.

?I have been able to really develop as a leader and an individual,? said Danika on her work, which has included leading her Catholic school's pastoral counsel. ?Through that, I have just met amazing people and I have got people who aren't very religious into the pastoral side of our school, which is great.?

A similar view was offered by Matthew Abas from St. Maximilian Kolbe CHS. An advocate for accessibility and the environment, he says receiving the Give Back Award helps underscore his work is having an impact.

?Right around Grade 8 I started volunteering at the Aurora Pasta Dinner for Our Lady of Grace Church, which I found very interesting because I met a lot of different people and I know a lot of different people now who are now my friends,? he said. ?It all started from that one assisting point where all I did was serve pasta. The most rewarding part has been being able to meet new people and have that connection to the community I never used to have.?