

Give Back awards honour 23 Grade 12 grads



By Brock Weir

Looking over at the group of graduating high school students this month poised to receive their Give Back Awards, organizers of the scholarship said they felt they really hadn't done much in their lives by comparison.

Nevertheless, students in York Region continue to surprise, producing outstanding individuals who give back to their communities year after year.

Now in its ninth year, the Give Back Awards, a scholarship program founded in 2004 by then Newmarket-Aurora MP Belinda Stronach with the money she earned in Parliament, has continued to reward students from Aurora and Newmarket who have shown leadership within their school and the wider community. Now administered by Neighbourhood Network, this program has expanded to East Gwillimbury and this year 23 students ? and nine from Aurora ? were honoured this year.

?It's a huge honour for me,? said Saarah Khamissa, who graduates Aurora High School this year, bound for Ryerson University this fall for business management. ?Over the years, my family has always been involved in the community. Being recognized for the work I put in is a huge honour.?

Saarah's family has operated Omar's Shoes in Aurora for over 40 years. Her grandparents and parents, she said, taught her early on it was good to become involved wherever she could.

?In the beginning, it was following in the footsteps of my family as being a part of the community and helping out,? she says. ?Then it just became really important to me. [After] university, the plan is to work with my parents and eventually take over the family business and keep it running as long as we can.?

Joining her from Aurora High School was Michael Nash, who will be heading to St. Catharines this fall to study accounting at Brock University. He was singled out for his volunteerism in the Scouts, particularly performing first aid through their Medical Ventures program. When he started, he was eyeing a career in medicine, but his experiences though the program turned his attention towards accounting.

He says he still enjoys, however, being actively involved in the program.

?It is really good to go out and volunteer in your community,? he says. ?It doesn't matter too much what you do, there are plenty of opportunities to go out and volunteer around Aurora. It is a good time and you feel really good for being able to give back.?

During the ceremony, which was held at Magna's headquarters just off Wellington Street, Magna's Marc Neeb hailed the 'outstanding achievements' of the students. While they are just a few of the seven billion people in this world, each does their part to make a difference, but the true volunteer is a rare commodity. If you convert that seven billion into a unit of 100, that translates to only 0.5 out of 100 being either willing or able to 'volunteer their time, commitment, talent, experience and energy.'

'You're in a very distinguished club,' he said. 'Giving back is really an extraordinary thing on this planet to do.'

Also honoured through the program was Sarah Osmond, a student at Cardinal Carter Catholic High School, who was heralded for her leadership in the Girl Guides of Canada, the Terry Fox Run, and Cardinal Carter's Leadership Council, as well as her fundraising work with Rose of Sharon, a York Region charity helping young and/or single mothers.

Ricardo de Sequeira was noted for his 'discipline, commitment, and integrity' in his drive to make a lasting impact on local and international communities. His efforts with Special Olympics, Markham Stouffville Hospital, and working overseas to help refurbish school rooms in Tanzania have combined with his musical gifts to make a well-rounded citizen.

Ricardo is a graduate of St. Andrew's College, as is fellow recipient Jason Lo, whose work with his church summer camp as a volunteer-counselor and coordinator made him a standout recipient.

Representing St. Maximilian Kolbe was Daniel Gary, who was noted for being a 'motivational leader' within the St. Max community. As Director of Communications for the York Secondary Catholic Presidents' Council, he has taken it upon himself to find grants to improve the school community and students alike.

Kara Waites was another recipient from St. Max. Organizers hailed her for her ability to work on a local and global scale, volunteering at Sunrise Senior Living in Aurora, assisting the homeless, and venturing to Ethiopia to teach English.

Laura Bondi and Glenda Willcock, two upcoming grads at Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School, ably represented their schools. Laura, organizers said, 'seems simply able to do it all' as a member of the school's Best Buddies chapter, active in autism awareness, as well as spearheading initiatives for LGBT equality.

Glenda also has exhibited a bit of an international streak. Active within her church, she is a volunteer with their Children's Clothes Closet and vacation Bible camp, teaches Sunday school, acts as a nursery helper and librarian assistant, and volunteered in both China and Costa Rica, the latter of which had her protecting turtle nests, canal widening, and community beautification.