

## Give Back Awards honour exceptional local graduates



Exceptional students from across York Region were celebrated at Magna's Aurora headquarters last week as Neighbourhood Network bestowed Give Back Awards on 20 members of the Class of 2025.

The Give Back Awards, a long-time initiative of the local organization that connects volunteers with opportunities within their community, honours students not necessarily for their academic prowess but rather how, as the name suggests, they give back to their communities? whether at school, to support area organizations and non-profits, or in the much wider world.

This year's recipients include:

Addison Johnson (Sacred Heart CHS)

Alexandre Bourre (ESC Renaissance)

Ava Hainschwang (Huron Heights SS)

Dabria Peta-Dragos (St. Maximilian Kolbe CHS)

Debby Morgan (Dr. J.M. Denison SS)

Emily Dafoe (Huron Heights SS)

Ethan Robinson-Vincent (Pickering College)

Hailey Graham (Dr. G.W. Williams SS)

Ishita Jain (Newmarket HS)

Ivy Wu (Dr. G.W. Williams SS)

Kateryna Lashchuk (Newmarket HS)

Laura White (Sacred Heart CHS)

Marygrace Telesco (ESC Renaissance)

Maya Balon (Sacred Heart CHS)

Nia Moshari (Sir William Mulock CHS)

Simona Kitenberg (Aurora HS)

Sophia Clearwater (King City SS)

Sumaya Chaudary (St. Maximilian CHS)

Sumin Sabrina Kim (Sacred Heart CHS)

Weichen Xu (Sacred Heart CHS)

“To Sumaya, giving back goes beyond donating time or resources; it's about building relationships and addressing community needs thoughtfully and inclusively,” reads Chaudary's citation. “Believing in the therapeutic power of crafting, she founded Crazy Crochet Companions, a school club that launched initiatives like Hearts for Hope – crochet hearts with caring notes for those facing health challenges, personal struggles, or isolation. The club also provides a supportive network for peers to seek advice, support and build confidence.”

Chaudary was saluted for her leadership roles in St. Max's Health Occupations Students of America and Model UN clubs, on the Town's Youth Engagement Committee, and her volunteerism with Southlake Health and Mackenzie Health – fitting volunteer opportunities for a graduate who aspires to become a paediatrician.

The work of Simona Kitenberg to promote Indigenous education and awareness helped secure her Give Back Award, with her citation stating her “passion for volunteering shines through” in her work.

“A key leader in her school's Allyship Club, she collaborated with the Town of Aurora to improve their municipal promotion of Indigenous education, resulting in local businesses and schools participating in the club's annual Water Walk Fundraiser [which] raised \$2,000 for the Chippewas of Georgina Island and increased awareness on boil water advisories in Canada.”

Kitenberg was also recognized for her work on Student Council and volunteer work with Polo For Heart.

She wants to continue being an agent for “positive change” when she attends Queen's University this fall to study commerce.

Business and commerce are key interests for Ivy Wu as well.

A volunteer with the Canadian Young Investors Society and Voices of the World, which promote financial literacy and minority empowerment, the Western University-bound student, where she will study Engineering and Business, was recognized for her efforts to “turn unmet needs into meaningful opportunities.”

“When she noticed her local library lacked Chinese books despite strong community interest, she began lending her own collection, sparking a cultural lending library now used by 30+ families. Seeing another gap – students unable to afford university-hosted debate tournaments – Ivy organized an interschool event with 100+ participants from five schools, many debating for the first time.”

In her post-secondary career, she's keen to continue creating opportunities for others to thrive," her citation notes.

Hailey Graham has also dedicated her time in secondary school to fostering an environment where others can thrive, serving as a student leader and advocate for the York Region District School Board's Youth Space Program, where she co-led student symposiums and shone a light on mental health.

As Student Council President, Hailey champions inclusivity and organizes school-wide events that foster belonging, including a recent accessible sensory-aware Valentine's Day event. She also co-founded a brass quintet that brings cheer to seniors by performing in local retirement homes.

After graduation, Hailey will attend the University of Guelph to earn a Bachelor of Arts and Science degree. She hopes to become a teacher and create spaces where every person feels seen, supported, and celebrated.

Dabria Peta-Dragos, like Graham, has been a change-maker at the Board level, serving as President of the York Secondary Catholic Presidents' Council, representing the interests of 53,000 students where she has proposed and implemented more initiatives than any president in the Board's history - championing student voices, inclusion, and environmental action.

For Dabria, giving back means building bridges between people, communities, and possibilities. With over 500 volunteer hours, she leads with empathy and purpose across school, board, and community levels. Dabria's efforts include leading gift drives for Indigenous children in Nunavut, youth mentorship programs, and tree plantings.

She also serves as Best Buddies President, organizing inclusive events for students with disabilities, and is Co-President of Aurora's Youth Engagement Committee. Dabria plans to pursue Health Sciences and become a surgeon, combining her passion for medicine with her drive to serve.

Service also drives Alexandre Bourre, who was honoured for his commitment to environmental protection and digital equity.

Alexandre volunteers with the Electronics Recycling Association, collecting and refurbishing used electronics for Canadians in need. He led a successful drive at his former elementary school and has since partnered with schools, businesses, and even his younger brother to expand the initiative - knowing that every device collected reduces landfill waste and increases access to technology. Recognized for his impact, Alexandre earned 3rd place nationally for the volume and quality of electronics collected.

He plans to study Political Science at York University, pursuing a career in politics and international relations to champion sustainability and create meaningful global change.

**By Brock Weir**