

?Give Back Awards? honour students beyond the books

By Brock Weir

When John Crowell looks over applications each year for the annual Give Back Awards, he wonders just what he did with his high school years.

But, for the Manager of Social Responsibility for Magna International, it is an eye-opener to the breadth of unique and wonderful things students are doing within their school and their community as a whole to make a difference and, yes, give back.

Applications are now being accepted through March 28 for the 20 awards of \$500 cash for 20 students attending school in Aurora, Newmarket, and Georgina who have made a positive contribution to their fellow students and citizens, and ?who have demonstrated an outstanding dedication to community involvement.?

The scholarships were established in 2004 by then-MP Belinda Stronach to award students beyond academia with the salary she received as Newmarket-Aurora's Member of Parliament. Since then, the Give Back Awards have become part of Neighbourhood Network and have expanded beyond Aurora and Newmarket as Neighbourhood Network has expanded through East Gwillimbury and Georgina.

?Regret!? says Mr. Crowell, when asked what goes through his mind when he reviews each year's applicants. ?I always wonder what the hell I was doing in high school when I compare myself to some of the applicants. We are always overwhelmed and it is always a challenge for the selection committee in terms of choosing because there are far too many students who deserve the recognition for going above and beyond.

?It can be required volunteer commitments for people who graduate within their own schools, but it largely seems it is their own initiatives where they tend to be organizing entire events and taking on new initiatives on their own. It is quite impressive and it doesn't seem like age or graduation is required to actually make a difference.?

Students, he said, tend to be high achievers in whatever they set their minds to, but this often translates to the quality of work they are doing in the community and through their volunteerism. In his experience, Give Back students tend to be ?extremely mature and really well aware not only of community challenges, but world issues, and a way to contribute and do something meaningful.?

When the program was first established, the money was made available to schools who, in turn, made their own nominations of two students, one male and one female, to receive the awards. Three years ago, however, they made the decision to make the application process significantly more student-led, letting them shine a light on their own achievements.

?We appreciated the promotion we got within the schools, but the big driver of the awards is to be able to celebrate students who share their stories and encourage other people who want to give back,? says Mr. Crowell. ?We ran into a number of privacy issues within the schools, for good reason, and we weren't able to take the award winners and share their stories. Now that we are doing it independently, we have our own ceremonies and are able to share those stories, ultimately recognizing those students.?

To see if you, or your 2014 graduates, fit the bill for this year's Give Back Awards, applications and further information is available at www.nnetwork.org/GiveBackAwards or through your high school's guidance office.