

Give Back Awards recognize students for community contributions

The global pandemic has changed our thinking on so many things, but one thing as strong as ever is the commitment by community members young and old to give back where they can.

It's just that in many cases these methods of giving back have made significant shifts.

If you're a Grade 12 student attending school in Aurora, King, Newmarket and Georgina, applications are now being accepted for the 2021 Give Back Awards.

Spearheaded by Aurora's Neighbourhood Network, the Give Back Awards are annual cash prizes of \$1,000, donated by Magna International, for up to 20 students attending school in these four communities. Recipients of the Give Back Awards are selected based on the exceptional contributions they have made to fellow students and citizens, and their ongoing dedication to community involvement.

It has been a year of living with COVID and it is truly, truly important for us to celebrate these students, says Tanya Dennis of Neighbourhood Network. There are still such great things happening in our communities and people who are still trying to make time to volunteer and give back.

Over the course of the last year, students have been giving back in creative ways since normal opportunities within the school environment have been limited due to public health restrictions.

Neighbourhood Network worked to underscore opportunities for safe and effective volunteerism within the community. Through their Spread Joy Not Germs campaign launched at the start of the pandemic, Ms. Dennis says people were constantly reaching out for ways to give back and, more often than not, this outreach resulted in forging connections between students and seniors who were at risk of feeling isolated.

The connection between students and seniors was a big one, she says. We had a ton of artwork and letters that were given to us to share with seniors in our community, which was fantastic to see. We have seen the need and the want for people to give and support others so much more. These awards are not about the amount of community involvement hours students have accumulated, but it is really the story they have to tell about how volunteering has had a positive impact on themselves, but also the positive impact on a person or an organization. They are such great students. They continue on and they do these things that people would assume nobody has time for.

Despite all the struggles and challenges we have been faced with this year, there is still so much goodness happening within our communities. Students have been creative in finding ways to collect volunteer hours and they are still determined to contribute to their communities by giving back and helping others despite this pandemic.

In previous years, Give Back Award recipients have continued their tradition of giving. One of the first recipients, Lauren Ott, has built on the legacy she left her high school and is now Chief Kits Officer of the newly-launched Kits for A Cause. Other students have turned volunteer opportunities into jobs and careers and Ms. Dennis says they have seen students who didn't feel comfortable in social settings, but through the act of volunteering they found something they loved to do that ultimately helped them get out of their shell and gain confidence.

Applications for the 2021 Give Back Awards are now being accepted and can be found at neighbourhoodnetwork.org/program/give-back-awards. The website outlines eligibility requirements and provides a form for applicants to collect a sponsor endorsement who can speak to their volunteer work.

For those who are eligible, Ms. Dennis encourages applicants to be detailed in their applications and tell their stories.

The deadline to apply is March 26 at 4 p.m.

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter