

Help send kids Back to School in style with Women's Centre of York Region



By Brock Weir

Back to School has always been a special time for Payton Chapley.

The start of a fresh grade is like a fresh slate, almost like 'New Year's', she says.

Okay, while some kids might not feel the same excitement as she does, the summer student at the Women's Centre of York Region (WCYR), is looking to spread that excitement as far as possible with fresh backpacks and school supplies for over 80 local students from low income families.

But they need your help to achieve this goal.

The WCYR, after their Backpack program lost Regional funding this year, has set a \$2,000 crowd funding goal to ensure that these kids are not left behind when they hit the books this September.

'A lot of Back to School stress isn't put on the child, it is put on the parent,' Ms. Chapley explains. 'With everything being, 'Look at all the new things I have this year,' some kids are going to school with a torn up backpack, two pencils and that's it. That can be really tough for the kids showing up and not feeling as prepared as everybody else, feeling less than. That is also a great stress for the parents to watch their kids go through that and know that they couldn't do more.

'To me, it is really important, especially now, to take that financial stress off parents and know their kids are going to go to school, they are going to get their education, and they are going to be excited and proud to go to school on that first day.'

From WCYR's perspective, it gives students and parents the tools they need to be ready to learn.

'For us, it is about creating dignity for families and really empowering women to be able to provide their children with a level of dignity and be able to move forward on that equality plane to keep up in school,' adds WCYR Executive Director Catherine Curtis. 'Our clients are primarily low and moderate-income women, so we're trying to remove some of the barriers that create that stress. Back to School time is expensive between clothes, school registration fees, and all those other things that ramp back up. If we can alleviate some of that stress for mom, that makes a huge difference and has a ripple effect.'

In addition to the financial donations, which can be made online at gofundme.com/WCYRBackpacks, material donations are also being accepted in the form of erasers, pencil sharpeners, highlighters, packs of paper, binders, and glue sticks.

'We try to do things somewhat by age range, so the older kids might need a scientific calculator to be able to participate in their math class,' says Ms. Curtis. 'The goal in past years would be to provide a water bottle as well so the kids have something to take with them, a lunch kit potentially. In some cases, we've been able to include a gift card to places like Walmart so mom could go out and get supplies on that list that comes home from school or get healthy snacks so kids are equipped to learn.'

As much as Ms. Chapley sees Back to School as a 'whole new start' for students, the WCYR is in the midst of a fresh new start as well.

They are moving this week from their long-time location on Harry Walker Parkway in Newmarket to new digs at Yonge Street and Mullock Drive.

As their lease expired, they realised they now have more space than they currently need.

The WCYR took on more space a few years ago for a social enterprise program that ultimately did not get off the ground "for a multitude of reasons," says Ms. Curtis, and a lot of their current space was being underutilized.

"It just seemed like it was time for a fresh start and, from a budget perspective, we really needed to tighten things up and reduce our administrative expenses from an overhead cost with the building itself," says Ms. Curtis. "We have been able to reduce our rent and related expenses by about half, which is significant considering the competitive market we're in with non-profits in the Region. And it is a fresh start for the Centre."

It will also, in the end, be convenient for women who come to the WCYR for whatever reason as the new location is easily accessible by both YRT and VIVA, and is in the same building as similar organizations like the York Region Centre for Community Safety, and is just across the street from Belinda's Place women's shelter.

"From a client perspective, it is easier to access and they can access multiple services in one visit," says Ms. Curtis. "We're all about change, so it is time for a change."

Helping with the transition is being one of the 20 community partners in this year's Magna Hoedown.

Being part of this event, says Ms. Curtis, helps the organization "from many perspective" not just in raising "significant funding" for their programs, but also raising the profile of the work they do.

The WCYR's share of the Hoedown proceeds will go to individual and transitional counselling programs.

"This is helping women in two different ways: individual counselling is exactly what it sounds like, with self-esteem, depression, stress and cultural adjustment, and all those services are provided free," says Ms. Curtis. "Our transitional counselling program is helping women leave abuse, dealing with things like a safety plan, housing applications to make sure they've got safe housing.

"We are a very diverse Region and we are really reaching all points."

For more information on the Women's Centre of York Region, including programs and how to help them directly through the sale of Hoedown event and raffle tickets, visit www.wcyr.ca.