

Holy Spirit students 'empowered' after beating out hundreds for environmental prize



By Brock Weir

Students at Aurora's Holy Spirit Catholic Elementary School are vigilant about what goes into their trash.

Food wrappers? No. Juice boxes? Think again. Their Green Team is on patrol, and this often extends into the home, keeping a close eye on what mom and dad are throwing away.

Is it a little bit much? After coming out tops against 700 schools from 56 school boards across Canada last year, that answer is a resounding no!

Holy Spirit took the crown in the Carton Council of Canada's Waste-Free Lunch Challenge, a program sponsored by the Carton Council of Canada and the Recycling Council of Ontario. The challenge tasked participating schools with decreasing the amount of garbage they generate. Through the process, the schools reduced their waste output by an estimated 16,000 kilos of lunch materials or, they say, equivalent to 35 grand pianos.

'We reduced stuff and helped the environment because we're trying not to trash the place!' says student Nicole, a member of the Green Team. 'We're trying to collect the garbage so our Earth won't be smelly and stuff like that.'

It is a sentiment which echoes around the room with the students ranging from Grades 3 to 6.

'I felt happy that we won,' says Patrick. 'I wanted to help the earth and the environment. If we didn't, we would live in a world filled with trash.'

Students keep a close eye on what their fellow students bring to and throw out at lunch time. They pay particularly close attention to things like milk bags and even pouches of Kool-Aid Jammers which are collected, sent away, and processed, often being woven into rugs and mats for the developing world and some trendy pencil cases and back packs here at home.

The group is led by Grade 3 teachers Carrie Kinsman and Christina Barbaro. Ms. Kinsman says she has looked on impressed with how the environmental message has resonated with the students.

'I think they really care,' says Ms. Kinsman. 'They feel they can do a small part and feel proud they can help. If we are not here on Wednesday morning when we have to gather all the trash, they are at my door knocking, saying 'this is our day!' It is motivated from within. They feel proud they can help out and they can do it. It is an easy way to contribute to the environment.'

Collecting garbage and keeping bags and wrappers out of the system is not the only way the Holy Spirit kids contribute to bettering the world around them.

They have invested their prize winnings, as they do with the small money they make from recycling companies after handing in their milk and Jammer bags, back into their outdoor classroom. They buy trees, buy perennials to keep it beautiful, and purchase seeds to keep their vegetable gardens thriving.

They grow squash, potatoes, tomatoes, all tended by the Green Team students, and make soup out of the harvest. They also grow sunflowers and each year when the time comes they harvest the seeds, package them, and sell the seeds for 25 cents a pop to re-invest in their outdoor classroom.

“Every year we build on it so it is becoming more of a community within the school,” says Ms. Kinsman. “They come up with their own ideas of what we can do with new initiatives. Younger grades go to every classroom and collect everything, fold them and pack them and it is almost as if they are their own little law enforcement of environmental stewards. It is really refreshing that way. They feel empowered.”