

It's back to school time for students and volunteers



By Brock Weir

As school gets back into high gear next week, incoming Grade Nine students and Grade 12s going into the home stretch will be thinking ahead to those 40 hours of community service standing between them and their diploma.

Some of these new students will be eager to get them done right off the bat, while others will be scrambling to get them all in as the clock ticks down to June. Whatever your situation, one Aurora organization wants to help you keep on top of things.

That has been a key mandate for Neighbourhood Network, the Aurora-based volunteer group, since its inception six years ago. As they continue to expand, it remains one of their cornerstones, despite some recent challenges.

“Last year was a bit of a struggle in the school system,” explains Steve Hinder of Neighbourhood Network of the labour issues which disrupted the 2012-2013 school year. “Our goal now is to get out into those schools. We’re in the middle of creating a link on our website where students can actually track their 40 hours of community service and we’re trying to find easier ways.

“We have made huge leaps forward in our social media profile knowing that is the way it is done and listening to students in how they communicated.”

It might seem like a simple step for an organization which focuses on connecting people in the community with groups, services, and individuals best suited to their tastes and interests. When the new website launches, it will be just one way in which Neighbourhood Network has grown over the course of the past 12 months.

On Thursday, the group welcomed a few hundred of their closest clients to Newmarket’s Riverwalk Commons for their annual Volunteer Appreciation Barbeque. It is, of course, a yearly affair but there was a new addition into the mix representing Aurora, Newmarket and, most recently, East Gwillimbury.

“We continue to develop our plans to grow Neighbourhood Network across the Northern Six municipalities,” said Mr. Hinder of efforts to expand throughout York Region’s upper tier.

“Over the past year we have been in East Gwillimbury and earlier this month we made a presentation to Council in Georgina.”

Georgina, the northernmost municipality in York Region’s N6, was very receptive to the idea, and they aim firmly bring the Town into the fold by the end of the 2013-2014 school year. They have already got their Georgina ambassador in Jennifer Anderson, the Executive Director of Georgina Cares.

Once that is in place, they are next targeting King and Whitchurch-Stouffville.

'It's all based around Magna's desire to make communities stronger where their employees live,' says Mr. Hinder. 'I think we have proven now that Neighbourhood Network is very much a grassroots organization, very much in touch with the needs within each local community with volunteers on the ground. Yes, we have our solid volunteer component and our relationship with partners, but it is now about identifying a community need, reaching back into the network we have and knowing who we need to connect with, whom to address that need.'

For Neighbourhood Network, it is all about communities working together. Businesses within the community, says Mr. Hinder, often see 'corporate social responsibility' as writing cheques, but more and more they are turning around to see it also means engagement and employees giving back.

'We have been truly greeted with open arms,' he says of the communities they have visited. 'Municipalities understand the strength volunteerism brings to the community and I think they are looking for opportunities to enhance it and that is what Neighbourhood Network can do for them.'

'I think we have to simplify the process for municipalities and residents so that we become the go-to for volunteerism and linking and networking community groups who are struggling, who are working towards similar goals, while trying to good, but are unsure what the road ahead looks like.'

When Sir William Mulock Secondary School Student Doaa Abou Hussein wanted to become more involved with her community, she was getting out of her own comfort zone, unsure of what that road ahead would look like. After becoming involved with initiatives within her school to challenge discrimination and combat intolerance, as well as becoming involved with numerous groups within her school community, she found herself one of over 20 students from Aurora, Newmarket, and East Gwillimbury honoured with a 2013 Give Back Award.

Doaa spoke about the value of volunteerism at Thursday's community celebration.

'One of the most important things about volunteering is putting yourself in situations you might not have imagined yourself in,' she said. 'When you see people smile and you see people really benefit from what you have been doing to help out, it is really, really important that people get involved, even if it is for the experience ' and life is a series of experiences. Why not experience something that will not only benefit you, but benefit your community and everyone in it?'