

Leadership conference highlights the power of the 'Misfit'



By Brock Weir

Everybody has their own inner misfit, but do you try to keep it down or do you harness its unique powers for the greater good? That was one of the questions left with local students at the end of September after participating with teens from across the country at the 2017 Canadian Student Leadership Conference.

This year's conference, held in Waterloo, was built around the theme of 'StartUp Leadership'.

Featuring guest speakers from across North America, the conference is intended not only to allow teens the chance to share ideas but foster an 'innovative spirit' within the leaders of tomorrow.

'I was playing volleyball when my dad asked me if I wanted to go,' says student Celeste Frank. 'When [I was registered] I was so excited I played my best game after that. I was really excited to see what this one was about, but I was not expecting what we got!'

'Rather than just leading others, they wanted you to create something that would ultimately define you and your legacy,' adds fellow student Meghan Beswick. 'Instead of just following and building your way up to something that already exists, they wanted you to build something that you had extensive knowledge on. From there, it was about trying to be a leader who has not only made something but is also making a difference with their passion.'

Students at Pickering College brainstorm ways to do just that through their Global Leadership Program but they came back from Waterloo bursting with ideas on how to kick things 'up to eleven.'

'I'm still reeling from the experience and all the different stories we heard,' says Meghan. 'They inspired me in a different way to go down a different path. I am still sorting through what I know I would love to do and what I know could make a difference right now.'

One such way actually unfolded this past Saturday at Town Park where Meghan, along with her sister and brother, and numerous volunteers from the Pickering College and wider Aurora community banded together for a morning of 'Pyjamas and Pancakes,' an all-you-can eat flapjack fundraiser to raise money for POGO - the Pediatric Oncology Group of Ontario. It was a wildly successful event for a great cause which attracted hundreds of hungry people eager to eat and do their part.

Looking back on the Conference, both Meghan and Celeste cite speaker Mike Smith as being particularly motivating in helping them zero in on their passions and priorities when taking on a leadership role. Founder of Skate for Change, a youth movement that empowers skateboarders to give back to the homeless or underprivileged in various communities around the world, Mr. Smith also focuses on the power of the 'Misfit,' something he says we all have inside.

'In a sense we're all like that,' says Celeste. 'None of us are exactly the same and none of us could be exactly the same. He is trying to build leaders out of misfits and he says the only way you can be a leader is if there is a little bit of 'misfit' inside of you. It makes you feel okay to be different, okay not to be perfect all the time, you can make mistakes and you don't have to be this perfect, pristine kid. You can do what you want through different avenues.'

Meghan said she agreed, adding, 'It reminded me of why it is important to be involved in your community and involved in your school or country. It is not just the necessary hours you need to graduate; it is because you genuinely want to make a difference.'

All this, of course, is music to the ears of teacher Josh Armstrong who says this conference was a "great opportunity" to instill inspiration into the students. All of the guest speakers, he said, brought with them a message that no matter who you are, or where you are in life at this particular moment, "you can actually make change in the world around you."

"I often think we think change is something done by people who are multitalented and can do better than everyone else, but really anyone who wants to make change, has a reason, and wants to start doing something right away can make the change they want around them," he says. "You don't have to be a super A-plus student all the time in order to make that change. Someone with a heart and desire to make that change can do that right away. As an advisor of [the Global Leadership Program] it is great to see your students engaged in something like this."

These are lessons Meghan has taken to heart.

Before the conference, Meghan said she was always looking at her future as what she needed to do now to make a difference as an adult, but the Conference was certainly a game changer.

"Now I ask, "What can I do before I graduate? What can I do before I end this year? What can I do before Christmas?" she says.

"You want to do everything and you want to do it now because you have the ability now. That is much different from someone just telling you, "You can do it'. We have heard that so many times before and it becomes such a cliché."