

Leadership opportunities helped restore Aurora's Opdebeek's optimistic mindset?



The pandemic has been tough on all of us.

While some have found inspiration along the way, others have found themselves turning inward and more towards negative thoughts.

Aurora's Natalie Opdebeek sometimes found herself in the latter category, but after the first year of living through a global pandemic, a chance opportunity to take part in a leadership challenge recalibrated her way of thinking.

Her positive outlook restored, the Grade 12 student at Aurora High School recently set her experiences down for an essay contest run by Optimist International.

Based on the prompt of "How does an optimistic mindset change my tomorrow?" her essay has been awarded top prize locally by the Optimist Club of Aurora. As such, her essay was also put forward to a district competition which could net her a bursary of \$2,500 above and beyond her local prize of \$250.

Natalie said she was "really shocked" her submission went the distance but was proud to be able to share her journey.

"The pandemic was obviously really tough," she explains. "This summer, I did a leadership program at my summer camp and that was kind of a big turning point for me when I wanted to switch my mindset around. Before, I thought I was turning into a more pessimistic person but that experience really changed my mindset. The director of the camp did a workshop with us all about how you view things in life, and he told us that where your thinking goes you go, and that was the biggest piece I used for my essay."

"It was a month-long experience and just reconnecting with people was a huge part of it. After a period of being isolated for so long, that was really big and it clicked with me during that month that it was kind of my decision if I wanted to be pessimistic or if I wanted to switch things around. That was my choice to make. Being in that position and being in a leadership position at camp and working with kids and being a role model to others was a huge thing. How did I want them to see me? Would I rather be a positive person or be this pessimistic, angry person? That was a huge part that inspired me to make the switch."

The experience, she says, was the best month of her life and, going forward, continuing in positions of leadership is something she would like to pursue as a student, in her career, and simply life in general.

As a Grade 12 student looking to cap her high school career, Natalie has set her sights on going to Fanshawe College to pursue interior design. She also hopes to obtain her real estate license down the road.

With those goals set, she says she is determined to "make the most out of Grade 12 because high school has been a rough experience with COVID and everything going online."

"I want to make it a good few months and end it on a positive note," says Natalie. "Just switching back and forth at the time I began to expect disappointment, which is kind of sad to say, but everything went online, then they talked about sending us back in person, they didn't, we were back online, and it was all over the place. I developed that mindset to expect disappointment and anything else would be better. It was tough, I'm a social person, so not being able to see family and being isolated was really tough and it was really hard to see things in a positive way.

"Camp was the best month of my life and I think continuing in leadership positions will have a huge impact. Meeting other people and wanting to be a leader is huge, and being optimistic helps you see the good in life, even when things aren't going so well, like in the pandemic."

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter