

Local students get Chamber boost to study skilled trades, manufacturing



Michael Quarcoopome has long had a love for cars.

From family trips to the National Auto Show or getting his hands dirty putting with his father around the garage, he came by his passion honestly, but it wasn't until beginning his Grade 9 year at Aurora's Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School that he realized he could make a career out of his hobby.

Now an apprentice at NewRoads Mazda in Newmarket, Michael's future career goals got a significant boost on Thursday thanks to the Aurora Chamber of Commerce.

On June 20, the Aurora Chamber awarded two local students with \$5,000 scholarships through their Business Engaging Youth Skilled Trades and Manufacturing Scholarships. Michael was the proud recipient of the Skilled Trades Scholarship while Maria Khomyakova, a recent grad of ESC Renaissance, took home the Manufacturing Scholarship.

Now in its second year, the initiative is designed to help students on their way to careers in manufacturing and the skilled trades, sectors which are currently facing a shortage of workers.

"We started this initiative last year and we gave away two \$5,000 scholarships as well for manufacturing and skilled trades. It's a legacy initiative for the Chamber," said Sandra Ferri, President and CEO of the Aurora Chamber of Commerce. "We are big proponents of getting youth involved in the business community and making sure they know there's a place here in Aurora for them to work and live."

Among the local businesses supporting the program are Bunn-O-Matic Corporation of Canada and the Lind Realty Team, represented by broker Lenard Lind.

Lind has been a long-time supporter of youth initiatives and becoming a part of the Chamber's program was a natural extension of his philanthropic work.

He says both recipients were "very deserving" of the recognition and he was heartened by the number of applicants who came forward in the program's second year.

"There is a huge shortage [in the trades]," said Lind. "I read every trade magazine and they are all crying for apprenticeships. We're

not doing a great job [of promoting the trades] through the high schools, so we have to educate students that there is another avenue.?

Maria, whose high school co-op took her into the manufacturing side of things, agreed with this assessment.

'I think not enough people my age are looking to go into those fields,' she said. 'When I won the scholarship, people were like, 'Manufacturing? I never considered that before.' I don't meet a lot of people my age who plan to work in manufacturing now and I think the demand in Canada is high. It's a field that can innovate so, so much.'

Added Michael: 'It feels really nice to be recognized for what I am doing. It might not be everyone's first pick, but for me, it's my first pick, and I think I'm just really happy with the outcome.'

Now that Michael is finished high school, he intends to pursue a two-year program to become a fully licensed mechanic, while Maria was accepted to York University's Schulich MBA course.

'I am very excited,' she said. 'I think it will give me a full introduction to business in general and I can apply that knowledge into manufacturing in the future. I want to own something and be a businesswoman one day, owning my own company and business whatever that may be but that's in the future and operations is really interesting to me.'

As both scholars work towards their goals this fall, local high school students will have the opportunity to learn more about manufacturing and skilled trades as the Chamber hosts a showcase on October 9 to connect students with the business community.

'We'll have manufacturers and skilled trades companies there and they will be able to walk around, talk to people from all these companies to see what opportunities there are right here in Aurora for them,' she said. 'This is hopefully an initiative that will go on for many, many more years. As the trends change, maybe it's not manufacturing or skilled trades, maybe it is something else, but hopefully we're always at the forefront of what our community is looking for in terms of workers and employment.'

By Brock Weir