

Local students tackle world problems as Pickering College's Global Leaders



By Brock Weir

Have you ever given a second thought to your birth certificate?

Sure, it says who you are and when and where you were born, but that one slip of paper entitles you to a vast array of benefits from healthcare to the right to vote.

Not bad for something that was taken care of before you could even take notice of your surroundings.

Birth registration is something Canadians take for granted but, as Aurora student Amy Kavanagh discovered, it is far from universal privilege.

Amy, a Grade 12 student who is on the cusp of graduating from Pickering College's Global Leadership Program, is tackling this issue head-on with a particular focus on Senegal.

"There are so many barriers that people are dealing with in these rural countries in Africa where they just can't register births," says Amy, who first became familiar with this topic while participating in a program at the University of Toronto's Munk School of Global Affairs. "It is something that is such a common thing for us, but it is a huge problem in Senegal. So many people don't get registered and then they have nothing in their lives; they don't have healthcare, access to jobs, and they are living off the grid and, in emergency situations, they're just done."

But Amy is not taking this problem lying down, she is working towards finding a solution to make birth registration as painless ? and incentivized ? as possible in the developing nation.

From the early seeds of interest sown at the U of T, Amy has been able to take her interest to the next level, using this topic as a springboard for her "Capstone Project", the culmination of her work in the school's Global Leadership Program.

The Global Leadership Program is designed to give students the tools they need to be the change they want to see in the world. According to acting director of Global Leadership Andrea Cleland, the program's mission is simple: equip the students with the skills of collaboration, creativity, and problem solving, key factors in building the "21st Century" student.

"We look to really find the potential in each of our students and to develop that potential and help them become what we call "change makers," says Ms. Cleland. "Our goal through the Global Leadership Program is to have our students be able to make positive, ethical changes in the world, not just be involved in those changes, but to actually implement that change. Our program from Grade 9 through Grade 12 really helps develop those skills."

Amy is among the first crop of students to take part in the program from Grade 9 all the way through to graduation. On first blush, she says she thought the mission of the program was a tall order, but the more she got into it, the more she realised its ? and her ? potential.

"We all thought, "How is this even attainable? This is a huge thing they are asking us to do," Amy recalls. "They were asking us to solve a world problem. Now, when we're all so much further into the process and we all know we have the capability to do that, I think that is something pretty special. It gives you the confidence that you can achieve something of that level when you have the capacity and the intelligence to actually apply yourself that much that you can solve something."

In Senegal, a solution to the problem could very well be tackling the geographical barriers to trekking in from a rural home birth to a government office to register a birth by developing an app for the country's burgeoning cell phone network, securing a van to transport people, and providing incentives like care packages for each registrant.

According to Ms. Cleland, when learning lights that spark and students are able to generate solutions of this calibre, it truly indicates the success of the Global Leadership Program.

"When you hear Amy speak you can get a sense of how confident, skilled and capable she is and I think that is what we're seeing; as students come through the program, they just have a tremendous amount of skill and ability but also know what to do with it and I think that's the huge difference," says Ms. Cleland.

On Friday, Pickering College's Senior School students will take part in the second of five annual "off-timetable" days which Ms. Cleland and the faculty say sets the Global Leadership program apart. On these days, students from each grade have the opportunity to get out in the community to enhance the learning they are doing in the classroom.

Grade 9 students, who are responsible for innovating solutions to make Pickering College more sustainable, will be in Aurora touring Clean River to see solutions in action at a local business. Grade 10 students, as part of their project, are to work with local grassroots organizations and their off-timetable days have so far taken them to organizations like Habitat for Humanity to see the impact organizations are having on the world around them.

Grade 11 students will work at the MaRS Discovery District and ventureLab to help them to take things to the next level in identifying a problem and devising a solution "on a global scale. Grade 12 will work with community mentors and participate in cross-examination style debates in preparation for their Capstone Project presentation towards the end of the year.

of all grades enjoy the opportunity to work with MaRS and Venture Lab.

"We have always had incredible students, but our students now really are focused on what they want to do with their skills and are goal oriented in how they can make an impact," says Ms. Cleland.