

Local Ukrainian student aims to support peers living with PTSD due to war



As she got ready for bed last February, Sonya Kovtun was getting settled in, as many of us do, by scrolling through social media.

But this was not an ordinary night. Sonya, a Ukrainian Grade 11 boarding student at Newmarket's Pickering College, was well aware of the threat of war facing her homeland at the hands of Russian aggressors; but that evening the threat became a reality.

'I said, 'Another ten minutes and I'm going to bed,' and then I saw the heartbreaking news about Russian missile strikes,' she recalls. 'Overthinking kicks in. My best friend was living next door and I knocked on her door and was crying in her arms. I couldn't sleep that night.'

With the time difference, despite calls and texts, she was unable to reach her parents until morning after a long night of wondering, what if?

While she found her family was safe the next day, many of her peers throughout the war-torn nation were not as lucky. As the invasion continues, these are the peers she's hoping she can help - even from a distance.

Sonya was one of five students who took the stage at Newmarket's Arc Summit late last month, pitching ideas to local experts. Her app, Children of the Future (COTF), aims to support educators working with youth suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

She honed her idea through Pickering College's (PC) Global Leadership Program (GLP), which tasks students with identifying real-world problems and researching and devising real-world solutions.

Sonya says the Global Leadership Program is her favourite element of the school and the issue she felt the most connection to, of course, hit all too close to home.

'I've been there, I knew how it affected me,' she says. 'I was able to come to the safest place but it affected me so much I cannot imagine what's going on in the heads of kids who are in the hot places of war. There are a lot of incredible stories of those kids and how it is influencing them, such little souls, in such a horrible way.'

She decided to create an app to help open the lines of dialogue between educators and kids who have been impacted by war because, in her experience, it 'can be hard to explain their trauma to an older person who is just sitting in front of them saying, 'tell me.''

She wanted something a little more accessible and 'playful' to break down barriers and form connections and did so seeking advice from people in the healthcare field.

'PTSD is very generalized,' she explains. 'It's trauma, but the trauma you can get from very different events. When it comes to kids, it can be very generalized as they suffer from it but they don't understand what's going on. It's affecting kids in a very big way and that's why it's important to specialize on PTSD due to war and not just PTSD; PTSD due to war is a very different trauma compared to other traumas.'

'There's a story of a six-year-old boy who was living with his parents and his mum went to buy groceries and never returned home. The neighbours assume she died on the bridge that Russians bombed in Mariupol. I feel very lucky and privileged that I'm here and I'm safe, but it also feels unfair. I'm here ' I want to help finish this war but I'm here and thought I couldn't do anything. I'm glad I came up with a topic where I can influence something.'

It was heartening as well for the PC community that she landed upon such an immediate topic.

'What we hope for is that a student finds something they can have empathy for their audience and develop something that has a use [and] when a student cares deeply about the topic, that they have something they can take action on and actually implement, develop and execute ' Sonya has already done all of those things,' says Julia Hunt, PC's Executive Director of Strategic Innovation and Partnerships.

Pickering College, says Ms. Hunt, is behind Sonya and her app 100 per cent and will give her all the support she needs to make it a reality.

'We do have a therapist as well as other mental health support services at the school and we know that it is important that an event like this has that type of advice attached to it. As a school, Sonya has access to that theme of running support and mental health support and she will be able to consult with those people on the development of her project.'

With PC's support, as well as support received at the Arc Summit, Sonya will be further developing the app during the holidays.

'I'm not best friends with technology, so it is a lot of learning. I want to get the app started, throw a few therapy events both here and at home, communicate with kids and move this project and make it a little bit more global,' she says, adding the app is both therapeutic and educational.

For more information on the Children of the Future app, including how to contribute to its development, email info@pickeringcollege.on.ca.

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