

Mentorship is key to Sydney's "Student Success"



By Brock Weir

Sydney Cobbald may have been the last to know.

The Grade 12 student at Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School, who has been a key player in her school's Peer Mentor program, the revival of their Terry Fox Run, and the bone marrow drive Something for Sarah says she didn't truly realize her work might have made a difference in people's lives until this September.

?It was right after the Terry Fox Run and I was sitting down with my friend Annie, and [peer mentor supervisor] Mr. Fuller and we were just counting the money and it was definitely the first time I thought I had significantly accomplished something. That was the first time I acknowledged to myself that I had done something here and I should be proud of myself.?

It was something others had acknowledged some time ago and this recognition has recently been racking up. This month, she was recognized by the York Region District School Board as one of just two Aurora students in their Celebrating Student Success program.

This recognition came little over a month after she arrived at Magna International to collect her Give Back Award, a \$500 grant program founded by Belinda Stronach for graduating high school students who have made a difference within their school communities.

?It is hard to sum up in a few words, but it is definitely big recognition within the community and definitely within the school,? says Sydney. ?Williams is a school that is getting smaller and smaller and it is great to see my school is coming together and doing such great things. We're still super-strong as a community and still have those strong morals.?

Sydney first began getting involved in earnest with her school community through Williams' Peer Mentor program. It initially started off as a way to help new Grade Nines make their transition into high school, but it has since been adapted to include camp days, outreach to Grade 8 students from feeder schools, and ?secret services? where participating student show up at an appointed date for an activity which will only become clear later.

These activities included anything from tree plantings ? as many students did this month with Neighbourhood Network ? and meal preparation at the former site of Aurora United Church. They have also tried their hands (and feet) at Relay for Life, entering a team in the yearly festivities, and other initiatives.

?Being a peer mentor, you just need to make sure you are very relatable,? she says. ?When you actually get to know them on a one-on-one basis, they definitely feel more comfortable with the atmosphere.?

In addition to her work with the Peer Mentors, her efforts to resurrect the school's Terry Fox Run with Annie was underscored by both awards. With the Williams' run stagnating for the better part of a decade, Sydney says she felt it was high time to bring it back.

?We used to do all the time in elementary school,? she says. ?When we came to high school I was kind of surprised [it had fallen by the wayside.] We definitely thought it was something we could bring to the school, have right at the beginning of the year, just to start it with a big bang, have lots of school spirit. It definitely turned out the way we wanted it to be, and even better.?

Recently, Sydney and her fellow Peer Mentors have been actively involved in Something for Sarah, an in-school bone marrow donor drive which has also reached out into the wider community. The students held their second annual event earlier this spring, bringing together not only the donor drive itself, but also student art and music.

Considering the growth between its first and second year, Sydney now sees Something for Sarah as something of a legacy she wants to leave with her at Williams as she prepares to go to the University of Western Ontario for their four-year psychology program. But it is not just a legacy she wants to leave behind.

?I have been talking about how I want to bring the bone marrow drive to Western,? she says. ?My goal is to have 500 more people join to bone marrow donation registry. So many people just don't know about it. Until last year, I had no idea how easy it was. I want to make people aware of it, and hopefully more people will start swabbing because it is such an easy process.?