

Optimists and Staples raise thousands to help students start the year off right



By Brock Weir

Katy Perry might have what it takes to make people roar, but when it comes to getting the school year off right to local students in need, she hasn't got a patch on the Optimist Club of Aurora and Staples.

In fact, Ms. Perry is a relatively new kid on the block. Brought in by Staples this year to add a bit of star wattage to their corporate Back to School Campaign, the partnership between the Aurora Staples and Optimists is one stretching back 14 years and, this year alone, they are over \$3,000 into their fundraising target with a couple of weeks left to go.

Their partnership is a simple one, which has evolved over time. Staples customers, and people just looking for an opportunity to come into the store and make a donation, can put forward the amount of their choice. This money is collected and, in turn, converted into gift cards which are distributed by the Optimists to local families in need living in Aurora.

According to store manager Susan Gaudet, this relatively recent innovation on the system provides a lot more opportunity to these students than the previous practice of customers donating the school supplies themselves.

"In previous years we were finding it was getting repetitive," she explains. "They were getting a lot of refill paper when there was such a need for different things. That is why they have gone with the cash cards because, that way, you can find exactly what people need. A couple of years ago students really seemed to need calculators but they weren't getting calculators as donations. They were then able to go out and buy things like that."

For Kimberley Kerr, incoming president of the Aurora Optimists, the gift cards also ensure that donations are distributed where they are needed most.

"Each school, each class and each grade has different requests and different lists," says Ms. Kerr, noting that past Optimist president Terry Sherin meets with each family to help them through the process, shop, and pay. "We ensure that every dollar that is donated goes to a child in need for school supplies. They can't get iPads, they can't get computers, they can't buy frivolous things. They have to buy school supplies and that is an awesome thing."

"It is all done very quietly and it is done so no one is bullied or know they are a child in need, and we know supplies are going directly to the kids."

In turn, while they welcome the boost from Katy Perry, Aurora's Staples store has found that knowing the Optimists are involved in

the school supply drive holds a bit of extra cachet with their customers.

'When we say it is the Optimist Club of Aurora it really sparks their interest,' says Ms. Gaudet. 'They see [the Optimists] around town and the other day I mentioned the Optimists to one lady and she said, 'Change my donation from \$1 to \$20.' It is all about community ' the fact it is all staying in Aurora really helps people give. The demand every year is getting greater for the need for individual school supplies.

'The community is starting to realise there is a need out there. They are starting to realise they have somebody to reach out to, but some still don't realise they can reach out to the Optimist Club, even schools. When I told a couple of teachers that they could reach out to you guys for assistance, they just found that amazing ' and it made them give more, too.'

As the school year approaches, Ms. Kerr says she measures the success of this partnership not just by the amount of money raised, but by knowing each student participating will be set for the semesters ahead.

'For the Club, it means a lot to us because we actually get to help kids in need and that is a very important part of our foundation,' she explains. 'We are not throwing the money out there. It is actually going to a child, and that child is going to succeed in school because he has the calculator and she has the pen, just like all of their other classmates do, even if they might be disadvantaged.

'It's the fact that a child comes into school on their first day, he or she can hold their head high that they have exactly what they need to have a successful year. You want everyone on a level playing field so when they have that opportunity to learn, they can learn.'