

Smiles Across Borders helps students connect through the written word

The written word has always had a power to inspire, but letter-writing in recent years has become something of a lost art.

Now, however, Aurora students have teamed up to forge international bonds through the simple act of setting pen to paper.

Smiles Across Borders is a new non-profit company spearheaded by St. Andrew's College students Michael Wang, Giuseppe Zeppieri and James Coppola, and supported by the York Region Summer Company Grant.

Set to really hit the ground running when the 2023-2024 school year begins in September, the student founders have partnered with the Samoei Boys Secondary School in Kenya to lay the groundwork for this global exchange of thoughts and ideas.

"In our middle school, our English teachers would ask us to write letters, talking about ourselves, but these letters were never actually sent," says Wang, who serves as the company's CEO. "They were imaginary pen pals. I felt the concept was really cool, but we didn't actually go forward on it. I felt if I received a letter back and knew for a fact I was writing a letter to an actual person, I would have been more engaged."

Earlier in his secondary school journey, Wang participated in a program called Sending Sunshine, which facilitated letter exchanges between students and seniors in retirement homes and, through this exposure, the idea for Smiles Beyond Borders was born.

"We pitched it as a not-for-profit organization," says Wang. "One thing we really enjoyed was creating global diversity. We just received a list of 30 Grade 8 students [in Kenya], our website is up, we have contacts, we received the grant, so we're on track to send out a group of letters. Once we get those back, that point of connection will be built, and we can expand to different classes, and even different schools, to help the greater cause."

"This is a way to let the students know what is out there in the world. For the kids here in Canada, we can appreciate the things we have; we won't take these things for granted, we understand the importance of what we have and how gifted we are, so that this way it helps both communities, I believe."

"The letters are tangible assets and us sending them letters and them sending letters right back to us and reading what they have to say will be such a humbling experience."

An added incentive for local participants will be the ability to collect community service hours.

"It's an easy and affordable way to help - it's just pen-to-paper and it doesn't take up much of your time," says Wang. "Once we receive the letters back, we will be posting the best responses on our website so not only will kids here participating in the program be able to experience it, kids everywhere - adults, anyone who surfs upon our website - can do that."

In this first year of operation, the students will keep Smiles Across Borders small, using the school year ahead, it is hoped, to inspire younger students to take on the mantle once the founding trio graduates in 2024 and move on to post-secondary opportunities.

For more information, including how to become involved, visit www.smilesacrossborders.org.

By Brock Weir
Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter