

Smiles Across Borders sends thousands of letters internationally over four months

Thousands of letters have been sent out to developing countries over the past few months by students across Ontario who participated in a student-run letter exchange program.

Smiles Across Borders is a non-profit company founded by senior students at St. Andrew's College, and supported by the York Region Summer Company Grant. The organization strives to create a global exchange of love and compassion by sending handwritten letters internationally to forge bonds and strengthen youth volunteerism in the community.

?It's been like a busy three or four months,? said founder and president Michael Wang. ?And we've done some pretty incredible things.?

Since officially beginning this past September, over 5,000 letters have been sent to developing countries, over 1,000 volunteers have been acquired across the GTA, and around 50 schools have become partners, located in countries such as China, United States, and Dubai, Wang said.

Most international connections were initiated through hundreds of cold emails. Wang noted that instead of reaching out to schools directly, they reached out to bigger organizations and food banks in the country that could act as a bridge to smaller schools in the developing country.

For example, a food bank in Uganda connected Smiles Across Borders to over 20 local schools in Uganda. Before their partnership, Wang had spoken with the food bank's founder to ensure both organizations aligned in their values and goals.

?With [the food bank], I feel like me and their founder had a connection of like, we both really wanted to improve the world and see what could be done,? Wang said. ?And then with more information that they provided us about the schools?how interested they are?that's how we decided to choose what schools we want to do.?

Funding from the York Region Summer Company Grant is one of the driving factors to the organization's quick success, says Wang, who acknowledged the gift that many non-profits often struggle to attain.

?I was able to have that \$3,000, so I could fund my ideas and turn them into fruition, and that's also how we came to expand in size so quickly,? he said.

Most of the funds goes to mailing out letters, covering website fees, and setting up general logistics.

?We're sending out hundreds of letters and depending on the countries?they can vary in price. So, we're putting all the money into that,? Wang said.

Smiles Across Borders began as a two-man team, but has since multiplied with team members from various schools in the area. As most of Wang's employees are students who hold multiple commitments, he strives to cultivate a culture of communication and positivity in the organization.

?We tried to make it as easy to work with us as possible,? he said. ?In the leadership team itself, it's around 10 people just dedicating their time to creating a better world.?

Another driving factor to their rapid growth is due to the hard work and passion of his team and volunteers, Wang said.

Working tirelessly over weekends and weekdays, in addition to completing full time studies, the team consistently promoted the organization, engaged with the community on social media, and believed wholeheartedly in their mission.

?It's kind of like working a full-time job,? Wang said. ?I think the main thing that pushes me and my team to do everything we have to do, is that we enjoy it. We don't really feel like it's a nine to five? it's a passion.?

Recently, a large number of letters were sent to Kenya. In the responses, the students in Kenya wrote back that they were really happy to read their letters and learn about life in a different country.

Looking into the future, Wang sees Smiles Across Borders continuing to make global connections for years to come, expanding to more countries across the world, and engaging with more schools across Ontario to provide students with more opportunities to gain volunteer hours.

Once he completes his Grade 12 studies, Wang hopes to step into an overseeing role in the organization and potentially look for another president who can keep things running.

In addition to understanding the social corporate responsibilities, and the hands-on experience of what it takes to run a business or non-profit, through it all, Smiles Across Borders has helped Wang become the man he strives to be.

?Learning how to communicate to adults, time management, how to help and navigate my team members, and just guide them in the right direction,? he said. ?It's really helped me become like the man I want to be and I strive to be.?

Letters that are sent out this month are encouraged to focus on stories and memories about Christmas, Wang said.

Those who are interested in volunteering or for partnership inquiries can visit their website at www.smilesacrossborders.org/.

By Elisa Nguyen