

St. Joseph students turn down the heat and turn up the giving



By Brock Weir

School's out for the winter break, but as kids from St. Joseph Elementary School were getting ready to wrap up the first half of their year, the cheers ringing out as the last bell pealed were probably coupled with the sound of a few chattering teeth.

But it was all for a good cause as the school turned down their heat by two degrees for Toonies for Warmth. In the student-led initiative, the students this year braved the cold and put their toonies forward for the right to wear their favourite sweaters to school ? ugly Christmas sweaters or otherwise ? to raise money for St. Vincent de Paul.

?We dropped the temperature for two reasons: one, it is an eco-initiative with energy conservation and we are not abusing the energy we have been provided and, two, it gives kids a sense of what it feels like to be cold,? explains teacher Luisa Raposo. ?They are lucky enough to have a warm sweater to keep them warm, but a lot of homeless or needy families don't have warm food or warm clothes, so the \$2 is kind of symbolic. We're a dress code school, so we get to wear our civvies, and the money goes to our neighbours in Oak Ridges and Aurora to clothe the needy with warm clothes, and feed the hungry with warm food.?

The Toonies for Warmth campaign is just the latest Ms. Raposo and fellow teacher Josie Varone have been spearheading with their students since September. Calling themselves the Luke 4:18 Club after the Bible passage highlighting service to others, their efforts have included a good representation in the Terry Fox Run in September, a Thanksgiving Food Drive dubbed the ?Turkey Run? and, this holiday season, the ?Elf Run.?

?This was a toiletry drive where a child was able to bring in an item and we gave each class points to keep the kids motivated and excited,? says Ms. Varone. ?They got a point for each item they brought in and the high need items [such as] laundry detergent, diapers, and packages of men's and women's socks ? were five points. The kids brought in items for about a week and a half and the group actually got to go with teachers as they organized to help put the hampers together.?

These young students are old hands at putting packages together for people in need. Operation Christmas Child, which tasks students putting together shoeboxes of gifts for needy kids abroad, is a particularly popular initiative within the St. Joseph Community. Normally the school takes on the challenge every other year. 2015 was slated to be an off-year, but the students would hear none of that.

But they have heard plenty about the Syrian Refugee Crisis. With this humanitarian issue receiving such widespread attention, it

captured the imagination of students at St. Joseph. They began to feel a personal connection with those affected, says the teacher, and spurred them into action to learn more and do what they could to help, hosting a fundraising sock hop and snack bar for Hallowe'en to benefit Project Hope.

?At each of our meetings, we start with a prayer and in that prayer we try to raise with the students awareness of how each individual person can make a difference as a whole,? says Ms. Varone. ?Each person can make a difference if we work together as a whole and the whole idea of working together really resonates with them. Alone, we can't do very much, but together collectively we can do a lot to help others in need. That is our focus; to share our talents with others and be of service to others.?