

Student community-builders honoured by Neighbourhood Network with Give Back Awards



At the start of quarantine, students from Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School had more than enough time to reflect.

Realizing they "took their privileges in Canada for granted," they set out to pay it forward.

The result was the start of 1,000 Hand Nation, a non-profit to help "impoverished" communities in Iran who don't have the same opportunities as their Canadian peers.

Two of the co-founders of 1,000 Hand Nation - Baran Agdasi and Parmis Riazirad - were among the 20 Grade 12 students from across northern York Region honoured last week at Magna's Aurora headquarters by Neighbourhood Network.

Recognized in two groups of ten - with the first cohort profiled this week - the collective represents more than 6,700 volunteer hours given to the community in a variety of ways.

The Give Back Awards are a Neighbourhood Network initiative that recognizes students for the contributions they have given to their school and wider communities rather than with a strict focus on academic achievements.

This year's honourees gave back to their communities in areas as varied as tutoring, coaching, and, in the case of 1,000 Hand Nation, reaching across the globe to help.

"They are such an accomplished group of students," says Neighbourhood Network manager Erin Cerenzia. "I have been part of the adjudications for the Give Back Awards for 12 years and this is the hardest year we have ever had and the highest caliber of nominations we have ever had. We were truly blown away by these students.

"They stopped counting after a certain point, so know that 6,700 hours is not a true representation of how much they've given back and I think to do that, as a high school student, says so much about your character, your values and who you are - and to not only do that in general but to do it in the pandemic and to see the ways that these kids continue to give back as the world was locked down, again, is so inspiring."

One of the trends Cerenzia says she has been seeing in applications in the last few years are students starting non-profits or social enterprises, something she says help students make ?volunteering, community engagement, and community support a part of their bigger life picture and life-plan.?

Such is the case with the team from Williams.

?Many of us don't realize all the small things that we do, but when it comes to the end of Grade 12, we see how much we have been able to help our communities, and our responsibility to the future generation is to give back to this place we've grown up in,? says Baran.

?[1,000 Hand Nation] gave us the opportunity in that time to reflect on everything and take a break from regular life, which helped us to realize how much we take our privileges in Canada for granted. Through that, we decided to start 1,000 Hand Nation to help impoverished communities in Iran who don't have the same opportunities we do. We have been given the opportunity to collaborate with other charities like Water Ambassadors Canada and to delve into new techniques like TikTok for marketing and GoFundMe.?

Adds Parmis: ?I feel like since we're so isolated from our family in Iran, it is such a fantastic opportunity to be able to give back to the community that raised us. So far with 1,000 Hand Nation, we have been able to raise money for over 400 food bags that have sustained families for eight to 10 days. We've been able to fund the surgery of a young boy with AVF and we have also been able to build a wheelchair-accessible washroom for a school for children with special needs and one of the communities in Iran that was destroyed by the earthquake. All that I am proud of because it is part of my culture and I am able to give back in that way.?

Also recognized in the first cohort were:

MARY CALLEJA (Sacred Heart Catholic High School) ? For participation in the annual She Shoots, She Saves campaign raising money to purchase defibrillators for indoor and outdoor recreation spaces; participating in local park-clean-ups; engaging with seniors; and supporting the York Region Food Bank. ?Fostering a sense of community means a lot to Mary, and it inspires her to bring belonging, joy, and fulfillment to others,? reads her citation.

EVA CHIMA (ESC Renaissance) ? ?Eva finds it incredibly rewarding to see the smiles she can bring to others through volunteering. Grateful for the abundance of opportunities and support found in her community, Eva was inspired to co-found STEAM Zone, a student-led group that strives to inspire the curiosity of youth across Canada through mentorship and partnership. During Peel District School Board's Coding Week, Eva's team led a virtual coding workshop for hundreds of elementary school students.? She was also recognized for her work with ANNA (Allies to New Arrivals), her local farmers' market and more.

EMILY FAINGOLD (Newmarket High School) ? ?Emily is driven by the privilege of giving back to her community and making a positive impact. She demonstrates this commitment by volunteering with many important community organizations. She delivers food from the Newmarket Food Pantry to people in need, teaches synchronized swimming at her local swim club, helps with maintenance at her camp, and assists with Sunday School at her church. Emily was instilled with the value of giving back from a young age, participating in her family's ?Spaghetti Dinner? community meal fundraiser, which provides hundreds of people in need with a warm meal. Emily believes giving back to your community, no matter how small the contribution, is essential to help make a difference.?

SYDNEY LOVE (King City Secondary School) ? ?Sydney's passion lies in helping those in need and spreading joy wherever she goes. She is an active member of her school community, volunteering as a mentor for other students, and as a member of the Athletic Council. During the pandemic, she saw an opportunity to bring happiness to people by using her artistic skills to design over 100 cards for seniors in care homes. Additionally, Sydney volunteers her time at the Bette Stephenson Language Learning Centre, assists children with sports at the Oak Ridges Soccer Club, and supports children at the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Picnic. Sydney believes that everyone can use their passions to help others and exemplifies this belief by taking action.?

ABBY LUNNEY (Dr. J.M. Denison SS) ? ?Abby has a great outlook on volunteering, saying, ?It all comes down to looking beyond

ourselves and [going] out of our way to help those around us. Even if it's one single person I help, it makes me feel good to be able to say I helped make a difference in someone's life.' She donates her time collecting food, clothing, and holiday donations for victims of human trafficking, coaching and mentoring young female hockey players, and in her school's Best Buddies program. Abby also gives back by leading hockey equipment drives for Indigenous youth, organizing food drives for local charities, and raising funds to help purchase defibrillators for local hockey rinks and community parks in the annual She Shoots, She Saves campaign.?

JEWELLA MACABENTA (Sacred Heart Catholic Secondary School) ? ?Jewella used her passion for graphic design to volunteer as the Social Media Coordinator for her school's SMASH (Student Mentors at Sacred Heart) and Eco Council. Thanks to her effective social media campaigns, Jewella helped increase student participation at school events and raise more donations for community fundraisers. During the pandemic, she also used her graphic skills to create and sell painted pots under her social enterprise, The Earthen. She donated all proceeds to support Southlake Regional Health Centre's most urgent Emergency Department needs, and to support students without access to the internet for online learning in her parents' hometown in the Philippines.?

NANCY SHNOUDEH (St. Maximilian Kolbe CHS) ? ?Nancy feels it is her duty to give back to the community. Volunteering has taught her to be more understanding of people from all walks of life and to appreciate the unique experiences of each person she meets. Nancy created a Birthday Box program for pediatric patients at Southlake Regional Health Centre to ensure they had special celebrations on their birthdays. She also serves as President of her school's Mental Health Council, and she raises funds for a range of school and community initiatives, including SickKids. As a result of volunteering, Nancy is inspired by the potential to create positive change and motivated to continue making those changes a reality.?

Also recognized with the 2023 Give Back Award was Aurora High School student Rizwan Kazi who used his pandemic time to develop a free tutoring program with the support of the York Region District School Board.

?It is such a tight-knit community and it's nice to be recognized for all the volunteer work we have done and get rewarded,? said Rizwan following the ceremony. ?I started a free tutoring program in partnership with the YRDSB, so growing up I didn't have the financial support needed or the educational support and I felt like it was needed, and because of the pandemic it was really needed for students. It has been really beneficial for students and to help mentor the students as well.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter