

Students go the extra mile to make disabled kids smile



By Brock Weir

The further Aurora student Lukas Weese and his classmates got involved with their volunteer work at Safehaven, the more they got a handle on just what they could do to benefit the local charity providing residential and respite care to disabled kids.

Rounding out the trio were fellow Country Day School (CDS) students Jessy Rosen and Jai Singh. They got involved with the charity through a civics program organized by their school's youth Philanthropy Initiative. The object of CDS' program is to inspire students to take a hands-on role in a York Region-based grassroots charities, become involved and familiar with the work they do, and present their findings to the student body.

The best presentation garnered a \$5,000 grant from CDS to their charity of the students' choice.

Jai had previously been involved as a volunteer at Safehaven and it wasn't difficult to persuade the rest of the team to follow suit.

"For me, Safehaven is an amazing charity," says Lukas. "It is a cause I think not a lot of people know about but I think needs to be raised throughout the community. To help these kids integrate within society is incredible because 30 ? 40 years ago they were shunned by society and even stigmatized. I think what Safehaven is doing is giving these kids the opportunity to be equal members of society and integrated into the community."

Under the guiding principles of the Youth Philanthropy Initiative, the group made contact with staff and they got them up to speed with Safehaven initiatives and helped them connect with the kids they served. Lukas says meeting the kids inspired them to highlight the work Safehaven does in the wider community, highlight things they wouldn't otherwise know, and help them fill any and all service gaps.

Evidently this inspiration did the trick. Their presentations to students and teachers back at CDS rose to the top and Safehaven received the \$5,000 cheque. Not content with just a simple grant, the students put their heads together with Safehaven staff to decide the best way to use the money. The result is Miles for Smiles, an offshoot of the charity founded by Lukas, Jessy, and Jai to further their efforts in making sure their clients are able to be equal players in the community.

Miles for Smiles provides funds to cover transportation costs for the kids to be integrated into the community, whether it is to get to Safehaven or any other amenities the community has to offer. Lukas says when they were able to put this initiative into action it was an amazing moment for the group and one of the most worthwhile projects they have ever done through their school.

"Transportation can be costly for people and for these people to get integrated within their community they need those costs to be covered," he says, following discussions to see how Magna for the Community can come on board to provide further support to the

organization.

?Hopefully these kids can now afford to be fully integrated into the community, go around and do multiple different activities. I hope through Miles for Smiles and everything we have done for Safehaven, to continue to be an ambassador for this amazing charity, whether it is getting them involved in amazing companies like Magna who really support helping the community because I honestly believe there is no limit to how much change can occur and how much an individual can give.

?I think, for me, I am always going to be connected with Safehaven and I hope, as I go on through my life, we will find other initiatives and other ways where we can raise awareness within the community and achieve a fundraiser that will support things like we did with Miles for Smiles. I have always been taught it is better to help others and always be a good community member who is always helping and I hope through Safehaven I am able to do that in the future.?

The students say that the Youth Philanthropy Initiative through CDS helps fulfil one of their guiding principles to build character within their students. It affords them the opportunity to highlight an initiative they might not otherwise know anything about, and inspire kids to become more civic minded and ?good moral citizens.?

Through their presentation and the work they hope to continue doing for Safehaven, they say that getting out and volunteering for the organization gives one the chance to meet some amazing volunteers, some incredible kids, provides an invaluable learning opportunity that will make you set for life.

?For me, it was honestly about finding a passion and finding a cause you feel passionate about,? says Lukas. ?Anything you can do as a citizen in our world today to help local and international communities I think is pretty amazing. The youth have so much power and so much ability to go out and make a difference. I think if they find that passion and find that niche to help the community then it can just lead to a ripple effect of a massive amount of kid doing what my group-mates and I are doing ? being very community-oriented citizens always willing to help when needed.?