

Students illustrate the human stories behind homelessness as they look for solutions



There is evidence of homelessness all around us, but how many of us stop to listen to the human stories behind a growing problem?

Hoping to challenge stereotypes that surround the plight of the unhoused and to build up a bank of community empathy, Pickering College students with a little inspiration from Aurora did just that as they celebrated the first successes of their SPARC initiative.

SPARC – Student Projects Advancing Real Change – is a new program launched by the Newmarket-based independent school earlier this year. It is designed to provide students in Grades 6, 7 and 8 with further opportunities for experiential learning in their community by addressing real-world challenges being faced by residents of York Region and around the world.

Once students have identified an issue, they set out to form connections with leaders, educators and others with a knowledge of the issue to learn more, build upon this feedback with independent research, all in the aim of coming up with real solutions.

Not every path begun by students took them in the directions they originally targeted, but students are able to recalibrate, redirect, and pivot to find their best way forward and their best recommendations for the community.

“I describe it as a marathon because you're going week by week, it feels like you're going mile by mile, and you're feeling that push to the finish line,” says Pickering College's Director of Middle School Julie Clement. “Any project that anyone works on, it can be a struggle and, as you move through it, there are setbacks as you go. To see the students get to that celebration [of their successes last Wednesday] and the pride they took in their work, and to know that all the people who were involved were able to support them – it wasn't just about the students, it was really about the community as a whole and celebrating how the community can come together to solve different issues [and] engage with one another in meaningful ways.

“It's probably one of my biggest prides as an educator to have this program be implemented at Pickering College and have such positive feedback.”

One such student group tackled the issue of homelessness as part of the Social Justice and Advocacy pillar of the SPARC program. Here, the students researched the issue of homelessness and formed community bonds with organizations that support the unhoused, such as Blue Door Shelter and 360 Kids. They also worked with Aurora Councillor Ron Weese after they were inspired to forge ahead with putting a face on homelessness following the Town's decision to turn down the building of a men's transitional and emergency housing building last year.

“Our goal in this project was to create engaging stories that show the human side of homelessness and answer the question, “How

can books help us understand and support people facing homelessness?' said student Ray at last week's celebration.

'We focused on homelessness because we wanted to raise awareness, challenge stereotypes, and build empathy,' Keith continued. 'We wanted to especially emphasize this overlooked issue and create a more informed and understanding world. Our focus was a final project where groups of students created storybooks. Our books all had different art styles, mediums, problems, themes and more. This showcases the diversity of the problem and the many shapes it can take. During this project, we especially learned about the stigma around homelessness and how it leads to misconceptions and unfair perspectives.'

Their work struck a particular chord with their fellow students, Clement adds, noting that students hope Councillor Weese will share the books with his fellow Council members.

Should there be another vote on the Aurora shelter proposal, Clement says students want to continue being involved in the issue.

'Some of the students expressed interest in going to Council meetings and being delegates from the community to voice their opinions related to those issues and really advocating - not just through the book they have produced, but sharing their viewpoints,' says Clement. 'This project was to teach them to advocate. Every single project is to build in our students empathy, no matter what - no matter who they are working with. We want them to empathize with the organization that is having an issue or is struggling.'

Additional pillars of the SPARC program include 'Designing for Now and the Future,' 'Environmental Stewardship,' 'Technology: Coding and Robotics,' and 'Identity and Community.'

For the Design for Now pillar, students worked with Paws & Boots on the Ground, a non-profit which trains and supports service dogs. Here, students developed innovative nameplates for dog crates on which trainers and staff can record vital information about the pup-in-training. They also developed new spins on whelping pens and training ladders tailored for the service dog community.

Students working under the Environmental Stewardship program explored various methods of stewardship for bees, chickens, invasive species, sustainable agriculture, and water, most of which they were able to test and put into practice at the school's outdoor education property, Blue & Silver Farm.

'One thing I learned in this SPARC group is how agriculture can play a key role in environmental sustainability by using crop rotation, soil fertilizing and reducing chemicals like pesticides to promote healthier ecosystems and more sustainable food growth,' said student Kayla.

Technology students worked to help community elders - 'Wise Ones' - to code and develop games tailored for each individual elder's interests, while Identity and Community students worked with Newmarket's Elman W. Campbell Museum, History Hound Richard MacLeod, and community leaders to get to know the community around them and create historical walking tours.

'As SPARC evolves, we're looking at how we can personalize it more, how we can connect with people that we already have relationships with in the community but maybe we're not working at the level where we're able to exchange in different ways; not only are they helping to educate our students, but we're helping them meet a need that they have,' says Clement.

Future community partnerships, she said, include the York Regional Police for mall safety and the SPCA and their community outreach department.

By Brock Weir