

Students take holiday cheer to less fortunate through Gifts for Good project

The experience of hitting the streets, packages in hand, to distribute to people who are most in need is one that will always be vivid with Eric Gao.

Gao was one of several York Region students who collected donated items during the holiday season for the less fortunate, packaged them with love, and then experienced the positive impacts of their actions first-hand.

Now, as President of Project 5K, he and his team are helping current students capture the same feeling while making a huge difference in the lives of others through Gifts for Good.

Gifts for Good, in partnership with area shelters, is an initiative of Project 5K, a group founded in Richmond Hill to connect high school students with volunteer opportunities.

Now in its eighth year, Project 5K's Gifts for Good program has grown by leaps and bounds since its inception and last year worked with six shelters, bringing together more than 60 volunteers to collect more than 550 much-needed items and over 50 care packages.

Participants are putting the finishing touches on this year's efforts, with most-needed items identified as mittens, scarves, sweaters, snow pants, winter pants, blankets and sleeping bags, masks and PPE, non-perishable food items, and backpacks and bags.

"For us, the holidays are mainly a time where people are focused on buying a lot of new things and a lot of gifts, but we focused on the idea that as people buy a lot of new things they have old things they may not want to use anymore but are still useful," explains Gao. "We incorporated that with our branding, especially at Christmastime. It's a great time for anybody who is looking to volunteer and get into volunteering to start."

"Gifts for Good, in the past, used to be that we would just gather donations for Project Rudolph, easing into the holiday idea and delivering items to homeless shelters. The idea this year is if we got volunteers to have a bigger hand in it and create care packages, they would have a very tangible experience."

As this year's drive took shape, the team noted that many of the asks were the simple necessities, with a special emphasis on products and clothing for men.

Participants in the Gifts for Good program volunteer not only their time putting packages together but working through their contacts to collect clothing, toys and other essential items. For each contact the students reach for a donation, they earn one hour towards their Community Service Hours.

"It's up to the volunteer to pick up (donations) and once they have gathered everything, that's where they meet us to provide the care packages," says Gao. "We have collected all the bags and created the standards of how to create care packages, as well as how to inspect everything to make sure we're not giving faulty products or extremely used or damaged things."

"[Previously] I was able to go out on the streets and hand [the care packages] out and that experience rests so dearly with me. It's part of the reason why I continue staying with this organization and it's what drives me and my team to make sure volunteers can get this experience as well."

For more information on Project 5K, including how to contribute to this year's efforts or volunteer for next year's holiday season, visit www.project5k.ca/gifts-for-good.

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