

Tickets help ?special friends? make special connections



(Charities such as York Support Services Network are doing one final -- occasionally creative -- to sell event and raffle tickets ahead of next weekend's Hoedown on September 14. Auroran photo by Brock Weir)

By Brock Weir

Ryan Maharaj is no ordinary friend ? he is a ?special friend?.

He was just a teen when he decided to dedicate some of his spare time to Kinark Child and Family Services of York Region. Now 24, he has used the past six years wisely forging a bond with another special friend. In his special friend, he lucked out. They share similar interests, both like to play the guitar, and find no shortage of things to do together.

?I have learned so much about different views on things, different aspects, and doing things that other people want to do as well,? says Ryan. ?I think the best thing is I have learned to understand the way adolescents think and the way they want to do things.

?We have such a strong bond between us. It is no longer just a special friend relationship; I see him as my little brother and we hang out beyond the program.?

Kinark is a community-based organization focusing on children's mental health and providing assistance and opportunities to children, youth, and their families. They are one of the 25 community partners for this year's Wild, Wild West Hoedown, hosted by Magna International.

Through Hoedown, each of the 25 partners will get an equal share of all proceeds leading up to the September 14 bash. With their slice of the pie, they plan to expand their Volunteer Family Respite and Mentoring program which links families facing mental health issues with ways to regroup and form connections with mentors like Ryan.

While Ryan was lucky in finding a direct connection with his buddy, Kinark too had a stroke of luck in finding him.

According to Kinark's Chris Simmons-Physick, one of the things they would like to do is generate more interest amongst male volunteers. With an over-representation of young women looking to get involved, there are many clients on the list who would greatly benefit from a male mentor, she says.

?Our families are dealing with kids with very high needs,? she says. ?Some of our kids can be very difficult to manage or demonstrate difficult or unusual behaviours, so it is not easy to hire the neighbourhood kid to be the babysitter or just leave a child of an appropriate age at home while you go out shopping.

“We recruit volunteers in the community and match them with clients who would really benefit from a special friend. Sometimes they're more than a friend, helping kids develop self-esteem and social skills. For other kids in many of our families, the parents also suffer from mental health issues, so sometimes volunteer friends facilitate some of that gap in providing a positive parenting role model.”

These are not your typical volunteers, she says. They require special training because of the complexities and challenges of each individual client. Their share of the Hoedown funds will help facilitate that process.

An ideal volunteer is someone not just interested in taking on that role, but also willing to make the time commitment. They have a comprehensive training program, which is very thorough.

“You have to make a commitment to build a regular relationship with your special friend, often for at least a year, and sometimes they go on for several years and become relationships that go on for a lifetime. It needs someone who is really interested in supporting a young person in their development.”

There are, of course, challenges unique to each of these situations. Training covers dealing with safety and “appropriate boundaries” as, after all, each client is in a degree of a treatment program. A special friend, she adds, targets each of the goals set to develop a plan with their buddy.

“We see this as really important support that really makes a difference for kids and families and isn't funded through our base funding,” she says. “A lot of the evidence demonstrates that for a lot of young people it really makes a difference in their resilience or their ability to cope and develop in life is having even one single adult in their lives who really believes in them and supports them. That one relationship is very powerful. We see it over and over how kids can really blossom with that kind of consistent support.”

“Some of these kids might not have very many friends, so it is a way for kids to get that kind of support that they may not be getting. It is a very practical, hands-on kind of skill building for kids that hopefully strengthens their relationships throughout life.”

As he continues to take on the role of a big brother to his special friend, despite the time commitment, Ryan does not hesitate to recommend the program to any potential volunteers, sharing similar sentiments as Chris.

“You really need to be interested in the program because it is a beneficial program you're going to have to give a lot to,” he says. “It's not a big commitment. Three hours a week is not much; you just need to meet once or twice a week and what you're getting out of it is absolutely tremendous.”

For more information on Kinark, visit www.kinark.on.ca. The Aurora office can be reached directly at 905-713-0700.