

Top 20 Under 20 student reflects on whirlwind year



By Brock Weir

The last twelve months have been a whirlwind for Aurora's Brooke Harrison.

As her reign as one of Canada's Top 20 Under 20 comes to a close this week, she is looking back at a journey which started off as a simple application, yet opened up new doors and took her on a path which was otherwise just a dream.

Brooke was named one of Canada's Top 20 Under 20 by Youth In Motion in June 2012. Through the program celebrating Canada's Future Leaders, Ms. Harrison was recognized for her work founding the Youth Advisory Council for Toronto's Philip Aziz Centre for Hospice Care, as well as her philanthropic work fundraising and collecting items greatly needed by kids in impoverished Northern Ontario Communities, as well as her early years as a budding philanthropist with the publication of the cookbook 'Cookin' in Brooke's Kitchen', which has raised over \$60,000 for leukemia research.

Through the program, she was put in contact with 19 other likeminded individuals, who have continued to maintain their relationships and brain banks for the greater good.

For her, this first meeting connecting with the rest of the Top 20 remains the highlight in a momentous year.

'What I wasn't anticipating when I sent in the application form and crossed my fingers was the sense of community and family, and the whole Top 20 family,' she says. 'It was really exciting and humbling to be a part of something that huge. During that first week, I knew it was a great experience and the people I met were fantastic individuals doing great things. Afterwards, it just cemented in my mind how incredible it was.'

This cemented fairly quickly, however, as when it was time to leave the celebrations and head back to Aurora to attend her own prom that evening, no less! 'I was a self-described 'mess' on the way home, emotional after the experience.

Since then, she transitioned from Youth Ambassador for Neighbourhood Network to their summer student, with duties including helping to oversee this year's Give Back Awards, which awards scholarships to students who are involved in their communities and helping reach out to people her age.

'Reading through some of the [Give Back] applicants has been pretty inspiring,' she says. 'I absolutely love working with Neighbourhood Network. The people I am working with are amazing and it is a pleasure to go to work every single day. The fact I am doing something meaningful and helping the community, is looking like a great summer so far.'

Another sure-fire highlight of her summer will be using the talents she honed organizing the Philip Aziz Centre's annual golf

tournament, this time organizing a golf tournament September 16 at Angus Glen to raise money for Youth in Motion.

Closer on her calendar, however, will be a special event June 20 at the Aurora Cultural Centre, where her portrait is unveiled in the annual exhibition Portraits of Giving, which features the work of Richmond Hill photographer Karen Merk. The exhibition strives to shine a light on the 'unsung heroes' of our community and will be travelling throughout York Region in the summer and fall.

One of three Aurora residents featured in the show ? along with Jennifer Ettinger and Stewart McLaren ? Brooke says she is humbled by the honour, but also somewhat surprised.

'I don't know who nominated me, but thank you to whoever did!' she says with a laugh. 'It was a really great experience getting to know Karen. It's very humbling and pretty crazy that I'm one of the three people in Aurora to be selected and the youngest to be in the book!'

'Enjoy it while it lasts, Brooke,' interrupts her mother Gina, with a laugh. 'You're getting older, it's not going to last for long.'
'Thanks, Mom,' Brooke replies with a grin, carrying that theme through the rest of the interview.

As someone heading into advanced years (20!), as this year's crop of Canada's Top 20 Under 20 is revealed this week, Brooke hopes as an alumni she will have the opportunity to meet and work with the new group.

'The biggest thing to me is regardless of doing incredible things in the community or business-wise, and scientific research, or you're just mowing the lawn, I think if you're a kind person that just speaks volumes about a person,' she says of what she is going to be looking for. 'I hope the incoming group of people portray those things, which they must if they are getting this far!'