

Wojtka aims to 'animate' the community of tomorrow



By Brock Weir

As a mother with five children ranging between the ages of 18 and 38, Aurora's Debby Wojtka has learned a thing or two about setting kids on the right path as they go into the world.

Welcoming her first child at the age of 18, quickly followed by a second, Ms. Wojtka decided to continue her education at Seneca College's King Campus. But, after a long tenure there, and three more children, she found a new path mentoring and providing mentorship to children in the community.

Her work with the Junior Youth Empowerment Program in York Region was recently singled out by the Town of Aurora, recognizing her as one of the recipients of the 2013 Community Recognition Awards.

Much of Ms. Wojtka's work is driven by her Baha'i Faith, and the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program, although open to other religions is primarily driven by that faith and is intended to help guide the leaders 'some who might even be considered 'at risk' in the community 'of tomorrow.

'The youth have been called to work with the younger generations, the children you are next coming up, because they are the ones who can best communicate and know what it feels like to be a junior youth,' she explains. 'It is that special age between 12 and 15 when you're leaving childhood but you're not really a youth yet.'

She works primarily with 'animators', the name given to youth just above this point who are tasked with stewarding the younger generations. Six of her first group she has worked with have now gone off to university, but the program continues to flourish under her guidance throughout York Region, currently based on select evenings at Aurora Senior Public School.

These older kids are called 'animators' because to reach into and inspire those 'tweens', you have to be animated and engaging, she explains.

'With every generation of young people comes an opportunity to make contributions to the fortunes of humanity unique to a particular time of life,' says Ms. Wojtka. 'When you're a youth between 15 and 22, you don't have the responsibilities you're soon going to have after you have finished university and have to become an adult. We have a lot of time to serve humanity and serve in your own community.'

Part of the program helps youth to make 'sacrificial efforts', such as focusing on the spiritual rather than material aspects of life to 'steel' them for a life of service to the community, she says. Academic education is a priority here, as it is believed it will help the entire community progress. And there is also a focus on helping to change their own local communities for the better, whether it is their individual street or surrounding neighbourhoods.

Aurora is diverse, she added, and that diversity is reflected in the youth that participate in the program ranging from Baha'i, to followers of a variety of Christian denominations, to followers of Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism.

?As a young mom, I worked hard to have my children, who worked hard to have my children transform into the people they wanted to be and to empower them to undertake social action for the improvement of their communities, and to really work hard to help families resist the destructive and prejudicial forces in their neighbourhoods and societies.

?We have a 10 year old from a Buddhist family, an 11 year old and two wonderful sisters who are Muslim, a couple of boys from the Jewish faith, and our youngest little guy's father grew up as a Mormon. Some of our animators are Baha'i, one is Muslim, and another is Catholic. Even though they would not say that we participate as a spiritual family in a spiritual community, all of their children and their parents have that innate connection to knowing there is something bigger, that is going to help their children transform their world ? no matter what kind of neighbourhoods and situations they live in.?