

Young innovators share their ideas for the future



Shane Lajeunesse is fed up with the amount of greenhouse gasses being pumped into our air ? as well as the lack of concrete action being taken to make it a thing of the past.

So, the Grade 7 student from Northern Lights Public School has stepped up to do his part to get more people to turn off their motors and lace up their walking shoes to get to where they need to go through the power of an app.

Lajeunesse presented his app, Walk It, at the recent Youth Innovation Fair presented by the Town of Aurora. Now in its third year, it is a chance for young people at local elementary and secondary schools to bring their big ideas to an even bigger audience and share their own concepts with their peers.

?Walk It is designed to get people to walk instead of drive because people are taking their cars on such short trips,? Lajeunesse explained. ?The app analyses over a dozen factors to determine if you should walk instead of drive, like distance, weather, traffic, current steps, the number of bags or heavy items you would have to carry, time constraints ? and the points you would earn from this trip.?

The points system is an essential component of the app. Not only can you collect points for making the smart travel decision, you can also earn through reporting various factors along your journey, including pedestrian issues and invasive weeds.

?Some sample tasks include how tall the grass is at the park, burnt-out lights, taking pictures of storefronts and more,? he said. ?The goal is to make people healthier, help save the environment and provide customers to partners and make sure Aurora is aware of what's going on. This idea appealed to me because I don't like the amount of CO2 that is going into

the air. I am not saying people don't do stuff about it, but there are a lot more people who aren't taking action. This is a way to help reduce the amount of CO2 that is going into the air.?

If part of Lajeunesse's goal was to increase awareness, it was mission accomplished at the Youth Innovation Fair where his innovation received recognition in the Intermediate Category (Grades 7 ? 9), nabbing the Eco Friendly Award.

His innovation, and the innovations from nearly 30 other participants, were judged and evaluated by a host of dignitaries and industry professionals, including Mayor Tom Mrakas.

Joining Lajuenesse among the intermediate winners were Farah Baig and Kayla Titherington who were recognized with the Community Leadership Award for their innovation ?Neuroglasses? and Jacob Leiher who was recognized with ?Most Innovative? for his RC Mower.

Taking home top honours in the Senior category (Grades 10 ? 12) was Matthew Mallery with his Robotic Arm.

Junior Winners (Grades 4 ? 6) included Suzanne Northrup, Danielle Northrup, Amelie Heng, Claire McWhinnie, Kaiash-Marie Sanderson and Thomas Patterson with ?A Centre for Us All?, which nabbed the ?Most Innovative? prize; Riley Hickling, Morhan Hine, Chloe Bell and Alannah Surgnor with their Eco Sort Recycling concept (Community Leadership); and Maddy Louhlin, Cait Uus and Jordan Fox with Save Our Oceans (Eco Friendly).

?Tonight, we saw a great demonstration of the innovative thinking and creative skills of youth through the ideas and inventions they showcased,? said Mayor Mrakas. ?I think we can all agree our future is looking great.?

Matt Mallery said his idea for a robotic arm came to him when his sister broke her arm and understandably encountered challenges performing some basic tasks as she healed. His 3D robotic arm concept uses machine learning and computer vision to recognize a hand, follow it and move the arm in concert to the movements of the hand.

?The end goal of this is to add a virtual presence device or a robot that can be controlled remotely through the internet,? he explained. ?The arm is able to be controlled by a user to do simple tasks anonymously.?

While an issue at home inspires Matt's innovation, the needs of the community as a whole inspired the students at Ecole St. Jean to develop their ?A Centre for Us All? concept.

?A Centre for Us All? is a plan for a completely inclusive recreation centre that addresses population growth in Aurora's northeast quadrant, current needs among sports groups, and environmental

innovations.

The team initially developed the concept as part of the FIRST LEGO League, but their ideas snowballed to the point where they took their initiative to individuals who can make their vision a reality ? including Mayor Mrakas, who has highlighted their efforts in his weekly column in The Auroran.

?We read the whole Master Plan and it was a big document, but we read it,? said Amelie of their research process, which also included interviewing stakeholders, such as the Master Ducks swim club, to see where current recreation facilities were falling short, and how their A Centre for Us All concept could help.

The results include a proposal for a 50-metre swimming pool and an additional dog park to serve the rapidly growing community.

By Brock Weir