



What's with kids these days?

by Melanie Levcovich

Project Give Back teaches community spirit



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What's with kids these days? That scornful refrain suggesting that children lack a decency displayed by their elders when they were younger is currently being uttered with an entirely new meaning. Thanks to a program that's sweeping through central Toronto schools, children are being instilled with civic-mindedness and empathy, while being empowered with the tools to teach their peers and challenge their communities.





The program, Project Give Back, works with over 500 grade four and five students in a year-long program that helps them identify and research a cause for which they are passionate, summarize the pertinent information, present it to their peers, and conduct advocacy and fundraising campaigns.

"What we are seeing, is that these children have the capacity to engage their peers well beyond the level we had expected because they are talking about a topic that they care about," says Dalia Eisen, Principal at Crestwood School. "I believe that of all the subjects we are teaching kids right now, none will stay with them and have the lasting impact that Project Give Back will."

Teachers at Dalia's school have also noted a leadership dividend that they are witnessing as a result of Project Give Back. They point out that of the classes participating in Project Give Back, almost all of the students are getting involved in student government or embarking on other self-driven community initiatives. All the participating schools are similarly observing students take what they have learned in Project Give Back and putting it to use outside the classroom. Whether it is collecting shoes for earthquake victims in Haiti, conducting bake sales, or doing thoughtful acts of kindness for a 24-hour period, the learning-by-doing approach is helping these kids internalize the value and rewards derived from helping others.

Last year, over 183 charities were chosen from both local and international causes. Sometimes the charity resonates with a student because the organization has helped a family member, such as Bloorview, Princess Margaret or Sick Kids Hospital. Other times, children direct their passion towards helping provide opportunities to those who are less fortunate, or to protect the marginalized through Unicef, Right To Play or the Humane Society. In all cases, the children have shown great empathy and maturity, both as presenters and as active audience members eager to learn about the various causes and understand the passion of the child who selected it.

Project Give Back was developed by Ellen Schwartz, a 17-year veteran teacher who has long understood the potential stored in young hearts and minds. In creating the program, Ellen drew from personal experience. Ellen's son, Jacob, was born with Canavan disease, a degenerative disorder that causes progressive damage to nerve cells and the brain. In 1999, she and her husband, Jeff, founded Jacob's Ladder to raise awareness, provide genetic counseling to at-risk families, and fund research. Through engaging children in the fundraising effort for Jacob's Ladder, Project Give Back was born. "I saw how eager children were to help, and I realized that if students learned to take their own passion and combine it with the tools needed to share that passion, the sky would be the limit," recounts Ellen.



Ellen Schwartz, a 17-year veteran teacher and the founder of Project Give Back.

Project Give Back has been operating for seven years and is currently expanding as Ellen hires and trains more teachers to deliver the program, and as more sponsors sign up. The Harvey Kalles Real Estate family has long been a supporter of Jacob's Ladder, and immediately recognized the value of Project Give Back. They are currently sponsoring two schools and are developing an initiative to help their agents get involved by individually sponsoring schools in their respective neighbourhoods. Other sponsors include Starbucks, Telus, Spinmaster Toys, TD Bank, Borden Communications, OnRoad Communications, St Joseph Thorne Press, UJA, Keller Williams, and Me to We Style.



Project Give Back™

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To learn more about Jacob's Ladder, please visit www.jacobsladder.ca.