Students get 'eye-opening' experience

Grade 10 students Trish Bicomong, left, and Shirani Anton put the final touches on a gift during Notre Dame Catholic Secondary School’s hamper program delivery day.

Staff photo/JOANNA LAVOIE

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December 18, 2009

Since 1941, students and staff at Notre Dame Catholic Secondary School in the Beach have adopted needy families during the holiday season.

"It's one of the highlights of Christmas for us," said teacher-organizer Angela Farrell Wednesday, Dec. 16.

She said that each year the all-girls high school assesses how many families it can support and, with the assistance of the St. Vincent de Paul Society, is matched with needy families who could use a hand up.

Four families from the school are also slated to receive packages this year.

Brad Simser, president of Corpus Christi congregation's St. Vincent de Paul chapter, is helping facilitate the Christmas campaign.

This year, families from three Catholic parishes - Corpus Christi, St. Brigid's and St. Michael's - received food and toy hampers.

"(The hampers) mean that these families are going to have some kind of Christmas. It's a very stressful time for a lot of people," he said, adding there are many areas of the Beach where families are struggling to make ends meet.

"This is just a little bit of help so they can have a Christmas."

For the past several weeks, Notre Dame students and their homeroom teachers have been putting together the food and toy hampers.
"We get their basic information and then we provide enough food for a Christmas dinner and some extras and gifts for each member of the family," said Farrell, a Notre Dame alumnus.

"Each student gives what they can or are able to do. Some students give of their time by helping with organizing or wrapping gifts."

Local parents and volunteers from nearby Catholic churches provide the transportation to the recipients' homes.

Delivery Day was Wednesday, Dec. 16.

Coleen Guyo, a Grade 11 student, was busy putting the final touches on some gift boxes Wednesday morning in preparation for their delivery.

"It feels great. We know what the families need and if they can't afford it then we're there to give it to them," she said.

Another one of Santa's helpers was Grade 10 pupil Trish Bicomong.

"It's a good cause. People who are less fortunate than us don't get things like this," she said, adding her class went grocery shopping together to purchase items for their gift packages.

"It makes you feel good. Things we take for granted like food or diapers don't seem like a big deal but it is to people who can't afford it."

Farrell said this time around students from the Grade 11 leadership class and two other classes are taking part in delivering the hampers.

"They get to see the impact this gift has and they often come back saying this has changed their lives," she added.

Erin Billinghurst was one such student who delivered gifts to a family Wednesday morning alongside her Grade 12 exercise science class.

"I thought it was very inspiring. It's definitely something I'll remember," she said, adding she was touched to see the smile on the face of the family's five-year-old girl when they arrived to drop off the presents.

"It was also eye-opening because we take so much for granted, especially at this time of year. To be able to give them something made us happy because they were so happy."

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Like so many young people, Annie Faiella discovered her love of music and performing in high school. The Grade 12 student at Notre Dame High School recently won a Battle of the Bands competition at the El Mocambo, Nov. 21, and credits Notre Dame with her victory.

“I was fortunate to have the opportunity to play at various Notre Dame assemblies,” Faiella said. “It was these occasions that made me realize that my love of music had blossomed into a devotion and passion.”

After graduation she plans to take Radio and Television at Ryerson University, while continuing to perform when she can.

Keep an ear out for her in the future. Her prize for winning the competition was 12 hours of studio time, and she is certain to be working on a recording.