

King student earns RBC scholarship

By Mark Pavilons

Our future is in good hands, thanks to inspiring young people like King's Nikisha Thapar.

Thapar is one of only 15 students nation-wide to receive the RBC Student Leading Change scholarship. The \$10,000 award will go toward her post-secondary tuition and ultimately will help make the world a better place.

Thapar received the award at a ceremony at the King City RBC branch. Community Manager Cesar Roldan noted 6,500 applications were received so it was quite a feat for Thapar to emerge as one of the recipients.

Rina Pillitteri, regional vice-president, said RBC is totally committed to youth and "it's so wonderful to hear that her submission was selected."

Nikisha said she's always wanted to make a change and her volunteer work is a huge part of who she is.

Nikisha is involved in organizations like Can You Hear Me? and Autism Ontario and has developed a strong interest in children and disability rights. She plans to raise awareness by enlisting the help of social justice and human rights groups, and start a social media campaign around these issues.

Nikisha will attend Trent University as a law and sociology student in the fall.

King Mayor Steve Pellegrini said Nikisha is a shining example of why King is one of the best places to live in Canada. (He was referring to the recent MoneySense magazine survey ranking King as 18th overall.)

"RBC has been an incredible community partner," Pellegrini said. "To see a local recipient is just icing on the cake!"

Thapar stressed that her "education" has come from not only academics, but extracurricular activities and volunteering.

She was involved in her school's Reach for the Top teams, the Model UN and Drama clubs, "which helped me evolve my strengths and abilities as a leader and orator. The skills and techniques required were similar and I wouldn't be on the path I am today if I hadn't had those amazing experiences."

She said she's really grown most of all through her volunteer experiences. The bulk of her work has been within the mental health, wellness and accessibility communities. She worked at Mackenzie Health Hospital and Southlake Regional Health Centre. She's also a teen rep for a charity called Can You Hear Me?, which does amazing mental health work for youth.

A family member with autism led her to volunteer and work for Autism Ontario's Kids Camp, Adult Programs and Summer Social Skills Institute, as well as volunteering with Kerry's Place Autism Services, and the Learning Disabilities Association of York Region.

"My work as a tutor, a peer mentor, a counsellor was with kids all over the neurotypical spectrum. I thought that taking on these endeavours would be a walk in the park - just do the same thing that I've always been doing, right? Wrong! I quickly learned that what works for one child won't necessarily work for another.

"Being a part of all of these amazing organizations has taught me to be tolerant, versatile and adaptable in all areas of my life."

One main lesson, though stands out in her mind.

"The lesson that I will carry around for me forever is how to love, and love so deeply that it makes a difference in every life that I touch forever," she said. "I've loved my teammates, I've loved my classmates, I've loved my friends and every single child and teen that I've worked with. Love is powerful, but most of all, love is the biggest inspiration for change."

Even though society has come a long way in terms of change, there's still a long way to go.

Thapar said there's a concept in law referred to as "ripeness," which basically states that a matter can only come before the court if it's deemed by the court itself to be an presently existing and substantive issue. In other words, people can't just bring lawsuits before the justice system and ask the courts the adjudicate matters that are hypothetical and, in their eyes, not even an issue where anyone in the matter has suffered any damages.

"Surely there must be a way for citizens to raise issues with the law before the courts without having to go through all of these damages, but at the moment there isn't one, and that is something I would like to change by way of raising awareness of this issue and studying the law."

Leading change is a multi-faceted undertaking. According to Nikisha, the essential elements that drive change are determination, discipline and a strong work ethic.

"There are so many elements that are crucial to creating change - collaboration, perseverance, discipline. But there is one element that I find absolutely necessary for change, because without it you can't get any of the others. That element is passion. If you're

going to affect any kind of change at all, you need to have a passion for it, and I mean a burning passion. Without passion, it's very easy to give up before even taking the first step to affect change.?

That passion, she said, can come from anywhere. It may stem from a traumatic event that you want to ensure never happens to anyone again, or maybe it's something that you've had to live with your entire life. You may even just be interested in the issue itself, and want nothing more than to be a part of something that's so much bigger than you. Regardless of the reason, passion is absolutely key to affecting any type of change, big or small.

Currently, Nikisha is considering a career in law. She's been working with her father who is a Commercial Litigator, and ?I have learned so much from him and from my research on cases.?

She also wants to continue her advocacy work in the mental health and accessibility communities through pro bono work, and ?expand my reach to other causes that I'm passionate about such as children and women's rights. I want to help in changing the global perception towards these groups, and defend their rights, freedoms and needs as fiercely and passionately as I can. In the end, we're all people who are looking for a good, safe life, right??

Nikisha isn't just a driven advocate. She's also a mentor and has come encouraging advice for others.

?Everything counts. If you want to make a difference in the world, you don't have to jump straight to creating an international non-profit while you're still in high school! Everything makes a difference. Everything has a ripple effect.?

She suggested that students get involved with school mentoring programs. Teens can also join international advocacy organizations such as Amnesty International.

?Giving back to the community will not only help others, but will help you grow and develop as an individual. The ripple effect is real, and I've seen first hand how far a kind word here, a simple action there, can go towards improving someone else's life.?

RBC's Student Leading Change Scholarship provides \$150,000 in scholarships to 15 of Canada's most civic-minded students. Each year, RBC provides over \$550,000 in scholarships.