

Sparking youth interest in global issues the goal of Junior Citizen recipient



By Mark Pavilons

We take freedom of speech and access to information for granted.

And yet there are still places around the world where this is a luxury.

Efforts by a Nobleton teenager to heighten youth awareness and participation in issues has garnered her some attention.

Anna-Sofia Lesiv, 16, has been named as one of 12 recipients of the Ontario Junior Citizen Award, sponsored by the Ontario Community Newspapers Association (OCNA).

This year's award winners are an amazing group of individuals whose leadership, ideas, creativity and generosity are fine examples of the outstanding youth of today.

In 2011, Anna-Sofia created a project called The Youth Informer, an online news network used to educate students about current events written in engaging and comprehensive articles.

She said the recession that year sparked her interest and when she asked around, few of her peers knew much about global economic realities. They needed to know more, and Lesiv began her work by writing articles. Soon, others supported her network by providing news and opinion pieces. She's had interest from across North America and even South America.

By presenting youth information in a way they find appealing, Anna-Sofia is aiming to solve youth disinterest in current events. She is providing young people with an outlet for writing and journalism in a platform where they may express themselves.

Now, they offer video interviews online. It's fun, she said, and the students are very much a team, operating in a structured environment.

Articulate, politically savvy and not afraid to shoot from the hip, Lesiv and her contributors take shots at inequities, social and political issues here and abroad.

A lot of Lesiv's focus stems from her family heritage in the Ukraine.

During a visit to a rural village where her grandfather grew up, she visited a school, only to find its resources sadly inadequate. They have outdated texts and no computers.

She returned home with the desire to help, and so the non-profit organization the Knowledge Fund was born. Through the site, and from a local fundraiser, she's managed to raise a little over \$2,000 to date.

Today, 66% of the world doesn't have access to the internet.

According to the website: "The Youth Informer exists because we know that we have been given a privilege not shared by two thirds of the world. We write not because we have to, but because we want to. We learn not because we will be evaluated on what we retain, but because we can. Our goal for the past two years has been to share our passion with you. Now, our goal is to share our privilege with those two-thirds."

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, schools in remote rural areas of the Ukraine still maintain resources and textbooks from another era. Ukraine's government lacks the funds to create a change any time soon. There is a drought of computerization. Schools are not adjusted to the 21st century. Some villages have no access to the internet at all.

"This leaves students effectively isolated. Restricted to only the resources that they have, any potential to foster a curiosity or interest is often impossible. It's time we change this."

Providing a set of computers to a classroom in Ukraine will open up a world of opportunity to students.

Currently, there are no independent media sources in the Ukraine, but Lesiv supports the efforts of a small, online news source and has earmarked some funding for them to continue their work.

At 16, she has the makings of a solid journalist and she said the first thing she wants to do each day after school is watch CPAC and learn about the day's events.

Lesiv doesn't pull any punches in criticizing the Ukraine's political leadership.

The country is in the precarious position of being the buffer between east and west; of having deep economic and cultural ties with Russia. A recent bid to join the European Union failed, out of fear from reprisals from Russia, Ukraine's largest trading partner. Protests began last November and still continue, in response to President Viktor F. Yanukovich's decision to scrap political and trade accords with Europe. People in Ukraine have taken to the streets in protests.

To date, at least five people have been killed and a number of government buildings across the country have been occupied.

Prime Minister Mykola Azarov and his cabinet have resigned. EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton is holding talks in Kiev with the president and opposition leaders, while parliament is debating how to respond to the protests.

Ukraine is very limited in terms of diversification of its trading partners; as a result, Russia is the largest importer of its goods. To Russia, Ukraine essentially serves as a hinterland producing its airplane motors, piping, turbines, and appliances, as well as providing a large portion of its food products, like meat, milk and grain.

Despite the political atmosphere, the Ukraine is trying to make progress.

And Lesiv is watching closely.

She plans more fundraisers within the Ukrainian community.

She also plans on returning to the Ukraine to purchase computers there to donate to the school.

These efforts are deserving of a Junior Citizen.

The final recipients and their families will be invited to a special ceremony in the spring.

If you'd like to find out more about her efforts, visit www.theyouthinformer.com.