

Neighbourhood Network has a very long reach

By Mark Pavilons

Community networking helps to build more than bridges. It creates long-lasting relationships.

King council and staff received an update on the work and progress by Magna's Neighbourhood Network. On deck were Erin Cerenzia, manager of the network, and Teri Hastings, King's volunteer ambassador.

Cerenzia said she jumped on the Network bandwagon back in 2015, to help volunteer efforts specifically in King Township. The partnerships began to take shape and the rest, as they say, is history.

Magna's Neighbourhood Network has been in operation since 2008. The concept was simple: build better communities by linking residents willing to help as volunteers, with important charities or causes they might not know exist.

It's a department of Magna International, which is engaged at the community level across York.

"For us, community engagement has always stemmed from volunteerism, so we have created a dynamic website that allows volunteers to search for volunteer opportunities based on their preferred areas of interest," Cerenzia said.

They also run volunteer programs like a spring tree planting day; offer an annual Give Back Awards scholarship program celebrating high school volunteers, and play an active role as the go-to resource for volunteering with all the high schools in their catchment areas.

The Network's growth has been steady, reaching East Gwillimbury in 2012 and King in 2015.

Today, Neighbourhood Network engages with over 14,000 volunteers and roughly 50-60% of their volunteer base are high school students working towards their 40 community involvement hours. The others range from young adults, adults, and seniors.

King Township makes up 4% of the volunteers and Hastings pointed out this is a decent number, considering the size of King and number of years we've been involved.

"I'm sure we will see an even greater number of volunteers increase into the future," she said. "I can tell you from personal experience, Arts Society King has attracted, welcomed and worked with several students found through Neighbourhood Network and it has been a successful experience."

Through the NN website, potential volunteers can search a specific type of activity to volunteer at, a time frame, and a location.

The statistics are quite similar with 5% of their 417 partners - local charities, non-profits, and community groups - coming from King Township.

"Many community groups are very active in King Township," Cerenzia pointed out.

The King Township Food Bank has engaged NN as a partner to attract volunteers, and to advertise their annual fundraiser the Sip and Savour. Also, members of their board have attended the development conferences organized through NN - how-tos on board governance, strategic planning and engaging diverse volunteers.

"It is one of my most important jobs as ambassador to connect with King community groups and expose them to the opportunities," Hastings noted.

Cerenzia told councillors they are a "free resource" to local politicians and residents. "And we encourage you to make use of us!"

For more, visit <https://neighbourhoodnetwork.org/>