

## Student-led 'Bags of Promise' a lifesaver for homeless youth



**By Julia Galt**

Trust students to know the value of a good backpack. Schomberg's Celina Lovisotto, a student at Queen's University, and partner Brooke Baker, a student at the Royal Military College of Canada, are the founders of Bags of Promise, an organization that supplies at-risk youth aged 13 to 24 with reusable backpacks full of essential resources and supplies. These much-needed items include school supplies, hygiene and self-care products, hats and gloves, masks, water bottles, and more- anything that helps the owner weather the many challenges that come with being homeless. Founded in spring 2021, the movement was inspired by Baker's own life experiences before university. "We were both students at Queen's University, and I had confided in Celina my own personal experience with being homeless," said Baker. "That was when we came up with the idea for Bags of Promise." Initially planning to eliminate the use of garbage bags by replacing them with reusable backpacks, Lovisotto and Baker later decided to fill them with the necessities homeless youth may lack- things, Lovisotto said, that most people "don't have to think twice about." In addition to their work collecting and distributing backpacks and supplies, Bags of Promise also operates around what Lovisotto and Baker call their "three pillars": service, advocacy, and education. These involve reaching out to the community to receive donations, contacting companies for partnerships and sponsorships, and hosting information booths around campus. Much of the donations for the backpacks have come from King Township community members, with others coming from businesses in King and Kingston, where the two girls attend school. On the advocacy side, Bags of Promise works to establish public policy and mitigate the gaps in care for homeless youth. They're also working on a mentorship program at the Kingston Youth Shelter, which will connect at-risk youth with university students for peer-to-peer support. Bags of Promise is also in the process of an educational pilot project at a high school in Ottawa, which delivers "Youth Homelessness 101"-style workshops. Virtual workshops, which will launch in a Calgary high school and throughout Kingston, are also in the works. "Brooke and I both feel that if we can have these conversations early on, and start mitigating the gaps earlier on, then people won't be left in the dark," said Lovisotto. "Brooke wouldn't have had a difficult time expressing her story to her peers, and someone like myself wouldn't have some difficulty approaching it and talking to her about it." To date, Bags of Promise has packed 60 bags, distributing 30 - 15 for women, and 15 for men and gender-neutral individuals. They plan to distribute the rest in spring, when the needs of the shelter change, and shift their focus to include more food items. Currently at 12 members, membership is open for any post-secondary students who would like to get involved. "I always go back and think that if Brooke had never told me her story, then I would have never known, and assumed that she was an individual just like myself who fortunately came from a very supportive home," said Lovisotto. To join or support Bags of Promise, email

bopkingston@gmail.com.