

Breakfast brings together community



North Hastings High School students Leah, Jewelian and Jade were among attendees at North Hastings Children's Services, on Saturday, Dec. 12, for the annual Breakfast with Santa. In their capacity as Youth Advisors with NHCS the girls helped serve breakfast for more than 100 Bancroft families. SARAH VANCE Special to This Week

By Sarah Vance

Families enjoyed an early appearance from the North Pole, on Saturday, Dec., 12, at North Hastings Children's Services (NHCS), in Bancroft, for the annual Breakfast with Santa.

Infants and toddlers arrived with parents and grandparents in tow, as Ontario Early Years Centre (OEYC) professionals facilitated networking activities using seasonal themes.

"For the past five years, the children, parents and grandparents have loved the wonderful celebration with the opportunity to eat a hot breakfast and take family portraits with our guest of honour, Santa," said Jessica Anderson, executive director of NHCS. "Each year the United Way of Quinte funds this breakfast and the Ontario Early Years team hands out books to the children."

Young adults who form the Youth Advisory Board, a project funded by the Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services, Safer and Vital Communities bursary, in partnership with NHCS, were also on-hand, dressed as elves.

"We usually serve around 100 families," said Sheila Roote, of NHCS as she prepared sausages, pancakes and bacon for the steady stream of arrivals. "It is an opportunity for us to get together and meet families outside of our weekly playgroups."

"I got here early this morning to cook eggs and hash browns," said youth advisor, Kelsey Dillabough, who ran the kitchen with Roote. "My mother has taught me how to be a great cook. It is an art I learned from her and this gives me a chance to do what I love."

Several long tables were set up in the resource room to accommodate the many families who shared in the holiday breakfast.

"I really enjoy watching the young children's reactions as we work with them," said Jewelian Rodrigues, a Grade 9 student who began working with the advisory panel over the summer. "It is very encouraging."

Literacy was blended into the breakfast, with each child receiving a seasonal book as a take-away gift. These were exchanged with children, by Santa Claus, who posed for portraits with the young learners and their guardians.

While they served breakfast, several youth advisory members spoke about the different community projects they have undertaken, from their base at NHCS.

"We are volunteers and advisors," said Grade 9 student, Jade McCarthy. "In addition to acts of volunteerism we take on different campaigns such as an upcoming bullying awareness day and the recent purple ribbon drive."

The Youth Advisory Board has also been known to undertake data analysis projects including a recent survey of area youth.

"We conducted the survey outside of the cafeteria at NHHS," said Sarah Myers, an advisor in her second year with the program,

who was recently nominated for a youth engagement award through the Royal Ontario Institute. ?We offered prizes and there were a lot of questions on the survey I was surprised by the participation rates.?

Youth advisors consolidated their findings through conversations with councillors in the Town of Bancroft and the local OPP detachment.

?Initially, as I prepared to speak to the town, I was nervous,? said McCarthy as she served orange juice, on Saturday morning.

?However they understood our presentation, the mayor was there, they were all very interested.?

?I was comfortable speaking to council,? said Rodrigues as she prepared English muffins and handed them out to families. ?I enjoy public speaking and council was small compared to presenting in front of an entire school.?

?Part of what we are trying to do is to change people's perceptions about teenagers in the community,? said Kelsey Dillabough, while flipping eggs in the NHCS kitchen. ?We want to showcase youth as leaders and we want to be trusted.?

?The Youth Advisory Board is a good use of my time,? said McCarthy. ?I enjoyed volunteering at the Water, Wings and Wheels event, I feel good about having leadership opportunities, like this breakfast today.?

North Hastings Children's Services is a licensed Early Years Centre that delivers a variety of playgroups with pre-natal to school age services and a full spectrum of child care programs, from their facility downtown Bancroft.

The annual Breakfast with Santa showcased the substantial bond between the facility and the attending families, who arrived with children as young as two months and as old as 16 years.

?I am very proud of my daughter's contributions and these opportunities,? said parent Wendy Dillabough who was also on-hand to enjoy the festivities as her daughter Kelsey worked in the kitchen. ?I want her to find her arrow, she will need it as she grows into an independent young woman.?