

Orillia Packet and Times

orilliapacket.com/2016/11/25/georgian-college-holds-sleepout-challenge-in-orillia



PATRICK BALES/THE PACKET & TIMES Tobey McCool, left, and Trish Flowers, are two of the organizers of the SleepOut Challenge at Georgian College.

While many millennials spent their Friday night binge-watching the Gilmore Girls revival on Netflix, some Georgian College students hosted something much more important.

The Orillia campus of Georgian College was home to the SleepOut Challenge, a nationwide initiative to raise awareness of the issue of youth homelessness. Georgian students and community members stepped out of their comfort zone by staying and sleeping outdoors in cardboard boxes for 12 hours overnight.

It's a way to experience, in a small way, the problems faced by so many youth in Canada. It's also a "frigid way to spend a Friday night," said Trish Flowers, one of the organizers of the local event.

"The whole purpose is to raise awareness and funding for youth homelessness in Canada," Flowers added.

The challenge is part of the Push for Change initiative started by Joe Roberts, a former homeless youth. Roberts is on a 17-month journey pushing a shopping cart across Canada to raise money and awareness to end youth homelessness.

While Roberts will be in Orillia on New Year's Day, the SleepOut Challenge took place on his 50th birthday. He planned to speak to the participants via video at the event, joining a number of guest speakers who educated the participants about an issue many are unaware of.

“I think a lot of people in Orillia think because they can’t see kids sleeping out on the street, that it doesn’t exist,” said Tobey McCool, another organizer of the Georgian event. “But, even kids that are couch surfing are considered homeless A lot of kids in this school have no idea.”

Indeed, it hits much closer to home than people may think.

“A lot of people have started to come to us and tell us their stories,” said Flowers, who said the time she’s spent on the project has been extremely eye opening. “Even on campus, we were shocked how many people were affected by this.”

One of those stories is from McCool. Before entering the social service worker program, she spent a portion of her youth homeless. She’s reluctant to talk about her past, but she knows what could have helped her through her troubles.

“I think what would have helped me would be a place to stay,” McCool said. “At that time, there were no shelters for youth.”

Organizers at Georgian say they’ve seen an overwhelmingly positive response in advance of Friday’s event. They’ve been promoting it to both their classmates and members of the greater Orillia community.

The SleepOut Challenge is also a fundraiser, with donations pouring in from the community. A silent auction took place at the event, hoping to raise \$2,000. Half of all money raised will go to the Push for Change campaign, with the remainder going to support a future youth homeless shelter in Orillia.

A second SleepOut Challenge will take place March 3.

pbales@postmedia.com

twitter.com/patrickbales