

Students challenged to sleep out

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Georgian College students are holding a Sleep Out Challenge to raise awareness and funds for Push for Change campaign against youth homelessness in Canada. Pictured, from left, are Nicole Norris, community project liaison and one of the four participating students, Stephen Gander, from the community justice services program. MEHREEN SHAHID/THE PACKET & TIMES

Homelessness doesn't take a day off, so why should we in fighting it?

That was the message from a Georgian College student who took part in the school's Sleep Out Challenge last year.

"It was not comfortable at all," said Trish Flowers, who, on Nov. 25, spent 12 hours overnight in cardboard boxes with two colleagues. "I hardly slept. It was extremely cold, because you're on the ground.

"I was thinking, I have luxury items compared to what some people have," she said, referring to the four blankets and a pillow she was able to bring along.

Despite those items being available, all three participating students caught colds that night.

"In reflection now, I was able to stay at home and be in a warm and comfy bed and recover," said Flowers, a social service worker student. "But it made me realize these are things we take for granted and (other) people don't have that option. The next night they have to sleep outside again."

This year, following the examples from other post-secondary institutions, four students from the community services

justice program will be spending four hours, between 6 and 10 p.m. outside at the Orillia campus' courtyard. The event is being held March 30 and aims at raising awareness and funds for the nation-wide campaign of Push for Change.

"I find it will give me more insight into youth homelessness," said Stephen Gander, 24. "I find that you don't really learn a lot about it when you're taught about it (in class), but when you're forced to go do research on it and look up numbers, they're appalling."

According to the Push for Change website, there are approximately 35,000 young people across Canada who are homeless or living at homeless shelters and thousands more who are at risk each year. On any given night 30,000 people are homeless, and it is estimated that 20% of these are young people 16 to 24.

"For most part, society has failed them," said Gander. "At the end of the day, you have all these people who are homeless, sometimes it's not even their own fault -- society has allowed them to be that way."

The students will be collecting money to be forwarded to the Push for Change campaign that feeds into the Upstream Project, which hopes to adopt an early intervention program by targeting youth while they're still in schools and offering services to prevent homelessness.

"That allows authorities to take control before they end up in shelters," said Aaron Myrsk, a student in the community and justice services program. "Personally, I think preventative measures are better than a reactionary strategy of putting people in shelters."

Speakers from the community, such as Wayne Monague of the Barrie Native Friendship Centre, will talk about homelessness from different perspectives.

"One of the things we're focusing on this semester is collecting 500 signed letters to be sent to Bruce Stanton's (MP Simcoe North) office to talk about a national housing strategy," said Nicole Norris, community project liaison at the Centre for Social Entrepreneurship.

Donations will be accepted in cash or cheque at the event or contributions can be made online at chimp.net/groups/push-for-change-cpi-georgian-college-orillia. For more information visit facebook.com/GCpushforchange.

mshahid@postmedia.com

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