

Kids and philanthropy



By Randy Ray

I don't know about you but I didn't take philanthropy seriously until I was in my 30s. As a busy parent with kids, home renovations and mortgages to worry about, it was never at the top of my to-do list.

And I must admit that my parents never prodded me to think much about giving to those who are less fortunate.

Is this the scenario in your household? If so, maybe it's time to sit the kiddies down and have a frank discussion about philanthropy, which the Oxford Dictionary defines as "the desire to help others, especially through donation of money to good causes."

Nationally, 85% of Canadians aged 15 and older donated a total of \$8.9 billion to charitable or non-profit organizations in 2004 (most recent figures available), for an average of \$341 per person, according to the Ottawa chapter of the Association of Fundraising Professionals (AFP), which advances philanthropy through advocacy, research, education and certification programs.

Older Canadians on average give more than younger Canadians, says AFP. The average donation by those 65 and older was \$490 in 2004, while those between 15 and 24 years old donated \$111.

Without question, larger individual gifts would be welcomed with open arms. And the folks who run the Ottawa AFP chapter – and others involved in charitable giving in the city – feel there's good potential to increase these numbers if Canadians learn about philanthropy at an early age, even as young as four or five years old.

Like most life lessons, it's never too early to instill philanthropy in a child. Kids should learn that it's not just for adults or the wealthy, but that anyone making an attempt to better society is a philanthropist, whether they donate money, food, unused toys and clothing, or their time.

“Getting them started young helps them realize there is a whole other world out there besides themselves,” says AFP Ottawa chapter administrator Joanne Thurlbeck, who has recently participated in several fundraising activities alongside her two children. “They will soon understand the value of what they now have and how fast life can change for others.”

Thurlbeck, for one, is happy today’s breed of young people has embraced philanthropy. “I see a lot more happening with kids in today’s world than when I was a child. I am seeing kids as young as five donating to the earthquake in Haiti. Others are involved in tooney drives at their schools and she knows of children who have forsaken birthday gifts and asked that money be given to charities.

Thurlbeck’s daughter, for instance, recently announced that she and some friends wanted to cut off their hair to raise money for cancer. By the end of March they’d raised nearly \$3,000 for the Ottawa Regional Cancer Foundation and were planning to donate their hair to an organization that makes wigs for cancer patients. Her kids are also involved in a local BMX bicycle club that annually raises money for the Children’s Hospital of Eastern Ontario.

Kudos to the Thurlbeck children and all others who are getting an early start on philanthropy. Now that the ball is rolling, I’m willing to bet they will continue to donate to charitable causes for the rest of their lives, and probably more generously than others who start later.

“The value of starting young is that we all learn about philanthropy by seeing and doing. The younger they start the more likely it will be part of their modus operandi as they grow up,” says Barb McInnes, President and Chief Executive Officer of the Community Foundation of Ottawa, a public, non-profit organization that since 1987 has helped Ottawa residents set up endowments to achieve their personal charitable objectives. To date, the foundation has helped more than 600 individuals or families establish funds or foundations that distribute money to needy causes.

So what’s the best way to get your kids involved in philanthropy? Here are some suggestions:

- When disasters such as earthquakes and tornadoes are in the news, take your kids aside and discuss charities and the services they provide. Help them find a cause that is meaningful and make a donation in their name. If your children receive an allowance, encourage them to donate a portion to the charity of their choice.

- Go through your kids' clothes and toys every so often. Any lightly used item or toy that is no longer used can be donated to a local clothing or toy drive, such as Toy Mountain, which takes place in Ottawa each Christmas. Your kids will realize that other youngsters will be able to put their things to good use and hopefully, have a better life.
- Explore the pantry with your child and collect canned fruits and vegetables or other non-perishable items that can be donated to a food bank, or go to a supermarket and have your child pick out food items. Explain that your donation will prevent other people from going hungry.
- Volunteering is a great way to get your child involved in philanthropy. Young ones can visit seniors in nursing homes, adolescents can join an environmental group to clean up a soiled beach and teens can mentors or tutors at after-school programs.
- Be a positive role model. Kids often emulate their parents' actions, so by all means be generous with your money and time and involve your children when you donate. When the time comes to give to a favourite cause, don't simply toss a cheque into the mail; show your children a brochure or Web site about the organization you are helping and explain why you feel it is a good cause. Participate in local charitable events such as walkathons and invite the kids to take part and solicit donations.

Here's a thought I read on a philanthropy Web site based in the United States:

“It is important to remember that the spirit of philanthropy is not about what or how much you give but rather about the feeling that you are helping others in need.”

Amen.

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