

Catholic teen highlights stories of homeless with respect and compassion

While most teens shy away from speaking with strangers, 16-year-old Rachel Way seeks them out, strikes up conversations, and enjoys the company.

“I really like the Humans of New York, so I thought I would do something similar to that with my own personal twist,” said Way, a St. Thomas More Collegiate student and the young creator of the Vancouver CARE Project.

The twist? All strangers on her blog are homeless.

“I think often people judge pretty quickly, when they are walking down the street and see someone who is homeless,” said Way.

“I think by reading their stories, we can understand: they have a lot of hardship in their lives, or just made one really bad decision. You can learn from everyone.”

She started her version of Humans of New York, the online photo and story-telling project, last August. The Vancouver CARE (Compassion, Advocacy, Respect, Empowerment) website launched in January and she hopes telling the stories of people she meets at soup kitchens and while walking down the street in poor neighbourhoods will raise awareness about what put them there.

“I’m giving them a voice to share their stories that they wouldn’t necessarily have. If they don’t have easy access to a phone or to Internet, they don’t have the same opportunities that I do.”

With any encounter, she added, there’s an opportunity to learn something. “There’s power in being open and authentic. The courage to share is so powerful.”

Way has been finding ways to reach out to the less fortunate since she was young. In Grade 6, she and a few friends raised \$4,000 for a school in Kenya.

When she moved on to high school at St. Thomas More Collegiate, she started volunteering at soup kitchens in New Westminster and homeless outreach programs in Vancouver. In Grade 9 she went on a mission trip to Tanzania.

“I just love talking to people and hearing their stories,” said Way.

The self-professed people-watcher has come to enjoy volunteering with local programs like The Door is Open or Good Shepherd Street Ministry and keeping an eye out for people who seem friendly and talkative. When the moment is right, she approaches them to ask them about their lives, and if they wouldn’t mind

being interviewed for her website.

“One time, one of the guys I was talking to was very intoxicated, but it was still very neat to be in his shoes and see what he is doing,” said Way.

The man had been sitting on the side of a street in the Downtown Eastside, holding a cup, and smiling at passersby. They talked for about 20 minutes when he said: “See, how kindness pays off?”

Way was surprised; he’d not so much as received a dime in his cup during their whole conversation. She asked him what he meant.

“He was talking about how many people he made smile, the kids he made smile and waved hi to, the person who was frowning and he told: ‘Turn that frown upside down!’”

The man explained to Way that he finds life fulfilling when he “spends his days making other people happy.”

Way, a Grade 11 student, added that while she’s been taught about First Nations history in class, it was only when she met people on the streets that she truly learned what some have been through.

“It was really eye-opening to hear their stories and realize many things are far beyond their control.”

Way shares stories and photos about those she meets on her website, Instagram, and Facebook pages. She’s received much encouragement from her teachers and hopes to continue running the project through her last year of high school and into her university years.

It comes down to her personal interests and her desire to give back to her community.

“I’ve always been taught, when it comes to changing the world, use your talents,” said Way.

“I can’t sing. I can’t dance. I can’t act. I’m not the most popular person. I don’t know what I can do. That’s when it occurred to me that I love talking to people and I love storytelling, so I can put these two things together and do something and hopefully change a little bit of the world.”

The Vancouver CARE Project can be found online at <http://www.vancareproject.ca>

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