

Teens learn about hunger on trip to Detroit

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Staff Reporter

Five Canadian teens spent three days learning about hunger as part of an 85-person BBYO trip to southeastern Michigan.

The theme of the BBYO Stand UP summit was encompassed in its title, "Hunger is not a Game: A Teen Issue Summit on Hunger Awareness and Advocacy." From Nov. 10 to 12, participants travelled to volunteer and learn in the city of Detroit, which filed for bankruptcy earlier this year.

Vaughan Secondary School student Dylan Nowogrodski has gone on BBYO trips before, including one last year to help people suffering after Hurricane Sandy. But despite what he's learned about poverty and suffering in the past, this trip was an eye-opener.

"I found it really astonishing that 48 million people in the United States are food insecure," Nowogrodski said. "That's more than the population of our country."

According to the World Health Organization, food security is "when all people at all times have access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life."

A July report from the University of Toronto concluded that in 2011, 3.9 million Canadians faced some level of food insecurity, with the biggest concentration

found in the north.

The teens took part in simulations in which they could experience the challenges of making ends meet. For example, the local United Way ran a workshop in which each student was given a character and a budget, and they had to determine how they would allocate their funds over the course of a month.

Nowogrodski, for example, was given the role of a grandfather. He said it was challenging enough to make ends meet, but then organizers threw him a curveball – his character was mugged for \$100 – and he had to find a way to make it through the month.

Ben Sterlin, a student at the Anne and Max Tanenbaum Community Hebrew Academy of Toronto, said this simulation was one of the highlights of the trip.

"It was really eye-opening because I don't pay any of the bills in my family – my parents do. When I did the simulation, it really showed me how much work parents have to go through, and how not easy it is to pay these bills," he said. "It really made me more grateful for the fact that my parents go through the work to pay these bills, and now I'm more appreciative of that."

What made the trip so effective was that it featured workshops and volunteer work rather than lectures, he said.

For example, he spent time at the



Toronto students Amanda Freedman and Ben Sterlin pack snack packages at a food bank. Teens packaged more than 20,000 pounds of food in total.

Gleaners Community Food Bank of Southeastern Michigan packaging snack bags filled with granola bars and cookies for kids to eat after school.

In total, teens participating in the summit donated 400 pounds of food to Detroit food banks, and they packaged more than 20,000 pounds of food to distribute to food insecure families.

Nowogrodski said he found it interesting to learn that food banks don't just focus on the homeless.

"It's not only homeless people who are hungry," he said, adding that your neighbour could be facing food insecurity and you might not know it.

"Just because someone looks like they're living an easy life and look like they're doing well doesn't mean they are," he said.

Although the trip focused only on the United States, Sterlin said he's able to take what he learned from the trip and apply it to Canada. He said he was planning to help food-insecure people locally by holding a screening of *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire*.

"We're partnering with the Daily Bread [Food Bank] and Mazon Canada," he said. "We're asking people to come in and bring cans of non-perishable food items, and 10 per cent of the proceeds we get from the tickets are going to Mazon."

He also plans to run a local campaign based on one he discovered on the trip. American students were sending letters to U.S. President Barack Obama on paper plates, expressing their feelings about hunger issues in the country.

Sterlin said he hopes to do the same here, but send the letters to Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne and Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

He said it's so important that people understand that hunger is not just an issue in developing countries in places such as Africa.

"Hunger is actually really prevalent in our society, and it hits way closer to home a lot more than many people think, which is why us teens and community leaders need to become advocates for this really pressing issue," he said.

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