

Who is NOBODY?

JUSTIN SKINNER

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Schools are always looking for new ways to help students build character and get involved in community projects.

Thanks to downtown resident and former Toronto District School Board (TDSB) teacher Kelly Clark, NOBODY is there to help.

Clark is the founder of the Who is NOBODY? initiative, which sees a cardboard suitcase containing a non-descript denim doll, a how-to DVD, karaoke CD, study guide and other supplementary materials delivered to classrooms.

Students take turns working on charitable or community-building projects of their own choosing, which they then present to their classmates. The students then add features such as clothing to the doll to reflect the work they did, slowly turning NOBODY into somebody who reflects their own interests.

Some 25,000 students have already taken part in Who is NOBODY? at schools across Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom.

Clark said the idea for the project came to her while she was teaching.

"I saw how much energy the kids spent trying to be like everybody else and I wanted to help them be different and explore their own interests while doing things to help others," she said.

Clark said the concept is to get kids involved in ways that appeal to them by tapping into their personal strengths. Individual projects must help people, animals or the environment either locally or globally.

Projects so far have ranged from food and clothing drives to raising funds and awareness for various causes to teaching youngsters to play sports.

"It's choose-your-own-adventure style," Clark said. "It's all about the kids' interests."

Who is NOBODY? also fits within the TDSB curriculum, enhancing four strands of literacy - reading, writing, oral presentation and media literacy - by writing about and presenting their initiatives to the class and affixing a 3D attachment to the NOBODY doll.

Because the participants lead their own individual projects, Who is NOBODY? is flexible enough to work for students of any age and at any level.

Beyond the obvious benefit of helping others, the project helps students explore and express their individuality and build character. NOBODY even works as a bullying aid.

"By giving students a chance not to be a bystander toward, for instance, the humane society, it encourages them not to be a bystander in other areas of their lives as well," Clark said.

In addition to Who is NOBODY?, Clark has created a French version, Qui est PERSONNE? and Who is GREEN?, which focuses on environmental initiatives.

The NOBODY project follows its own teachings. Rather than having the dolls made in a factory, Clark enlisted the help of women in the pre-employment program at Toronto women's support centre Sistering.

The women sew the dolls as part of their training while also being paid for their work.

Seeing the benefits, various Rotary Clubs have donated dolls to schools and some teachers have bought the doll with their own funds through the Who is NOBODY? website (www.whoisnobody.com).

Cedar Drive Junior Public School teacher Rebecca Brisimitzis said her students jumped at the chance to participate in the NOBODY project.

"I wasn't sure how it was going to go in this community, and it can be hard to teach a 10- or 11-year-old to see beyond (his) own family and (his) own community," she said. "They really, really loved it."

Brisimitzis' students' projects included a clothing drive for the Salvation Army, a student book drive for SickKids Hospital, a food drive for the Daily Bread Food Bank and awareness lessons. One student cleaned the school every lunch hour for her project.

She added the students have seen their own benefits, even as they helped others.

"(Who is NOBODY?) focuses a lot on character development, and that's a big focus for the TDSB," she said. "It really emphasizes responsibility, respect and perseverance."

More than that, the students have gained self-esteem and a philanthropic side as they have seen their hard work have an impact.

"They learned that even though they might be a little person, they can make a big difference," Brisimitzis said.



Who is NOBODY? Kelly Clark, director of the Who Is NOBODY? program, shows a finished doll and kit. *Staff photo/DAN PEARCE*