

# ARTS

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## Not your everyday garden gnome

Initiative tackles mental health awareness

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As mental health issues continue to become a regular part of conversation, one family has created a campaign that's spreading love and awareness.

Gnomebody is Alone is the brainchild of Miltonians Linda and Laura Lamont, who also happen to be a mother daughter team.

Meet their gnomes; not your usual garden gnome.

It's a tiny moulded, baked and hand-painted gnome attached to a card with the following message: Gnomebody is Alone. Please keep this gnome as a reminder that you are never alone. Mental illness is not a weakness; it is real. You are worth it - get the help you need. Please spread the word and help change the negative stigma associated with mental illness.

Each one is numbered and signed. About the size of a small thumb, there are different patterns on many of them and Laura likes to get extra creative for holidays:



her Valentine's Day one even had tiny pink hearts painted on it. And, they even offer a variety of ethnicities.

The goal of the message on them is to help remove the negative stigma that goes with mental illness.

People are encouraged to purchase the \$5 gnome and card, then leave it somewhere for someone else to find. It's hoped that the finder is made to feel loved and cared for, as well as open up a dialogue on mental health awareness. And, \$1 from each sale is donated to Family To Family

Programs, a non-profit group that helps improve the lives of families who have a loved one with a mental illness.

"We were leaving them around town and it seemed like the people that found them really needed them," said Linda.

Laura, 27, who's a mom to two young daughters, has also started a lesson plan kit for teachers, where she supplies schools with 30 unpainted gnomes, allowing classes to paint the gnomes then leave them somewhere in their travels. For \$20, up to 30 students



Julie Slack/Metroland

Raising awareness about mental illness is the reason the Lamont family has created Gnomebody Is Alone. (Left) Pictured are Linda Lamont, her daughter Laura Lamont, and grandchildren Finley Mae (left) and Matilda.

can paint gnomes.

"It's a simple symbol that can reach a lot of these kids, some of them may have issues, or not," she said.

The goal is that someone will find the gnome and feel special just for finding it wherever that happens to be: a public washroom, library, on a bus or the table of a coffee shop.

She said there are two stipulations she asks students to do.

"I want the kids to feel what it feels like to do something good for others," she said. "And I want them to

talk to their parents about things they are struggling with, so it becomes a gateway to talking about bigger issues."

So far, she's presented the program to several schools, and in the coming weeks, the gnomes will be painted by students at Craig Kielburger Secondary School as well as Bishop Reding Secondary School, where Laura graduated.

A school in Niagara Falls ordered 250 and had the students leave them around the school.

Another teacher or-

dered unpainted ones for her class and they painted them and talked about mental health and then left them for people to find.

Since the gnome success, they expanded to other items that are needle felted and they all have a positive message with them. It has become a full-time business for the pair.

Each tiny needle felted item, including things like penguins and cactuses, come with cards, chosen by the purchaser: loved, smile, stay positive, true, resiliency, energy and you matter.

Teacher response has been positive and more and more teachers are getting in touch with her to take part in the gnomes in the classroom initiative.

Laura said she's excited to be able to help others. She said as a mom, she always wants to teach her daughters that it's OK to talk about things.

"When you're not talking, that's when things start building."

You can find more about them on their Facebook page at Gnomebody is Alone.

She also encourages people to post their found gnomes on Instagram, or share on the Facebook page.

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