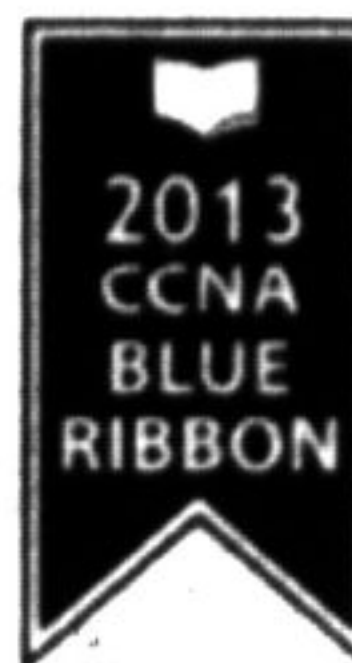


OPINION



PUBLISHER *Ian Proudfoot*
GENERAL MANAGER *John Willems*

Stouffville
Sun-Tribune
6290 Main St.
Stouffville, ON. L4A 1G7
www.yorkregion.com

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SATURDAY FORUM

We should all take stand against the 'R-word'

Retarded: a word known to express the delay in the mental development of a person.

Nowadays, this word is commonly used by teenagers as an insult.

Many people do not understand the significance of this single word. Not so for the Zak family of Stouffville.

Brandon Zak developed what is referred to as IQplus. It is a very rare genetic disorder with which very few teenagers are born. It postpones the development of a person's mental condition.

This disability enables people such as Brandon to become victims of the word "retarded". The problem is autistic people are unable to understand they are being targeted.

This makes it harder on those who can, including Vanessa Zak, Brandon's younger sister. Inspired by her relationship with her brother, Vanessa wrote a speech in Grade 8 about reducing the use of the R-word and presented it to her school.

Vanessa took a step further and contacted Citytv, which created a video to tell the story.

The objective was to motivate others to respect those with special needs and, most importantly, eliminate the R-word.

"I saw a rise in the use of the word and I wanted to make a difference for my brother and others," Vanessa said.

Her motives are to raise awareness about the R-word and persuade people to stop using it. The word has been used on her brother but he wasn't aware of it and the pain it caused his sister.

The video shows the loving affection Vanessa shares for her older brother and their close bond. At times, their roles of the older and younger sibling are reversed.

Vanessa's campaign has proven to be successful. People have apologized and altered their vocabulary and she has been invited to schools to promote her cause.



Subhangi Anandarajah

"A lot of people aren't aware of what they're saying," she said. "They should be educated so they'll know and they'll stop."

A single 14-year-old has encouraged a section of Ontario to respect autistic children.

However, Vanessa has done more than persuade others to respect disabled citizens. She has taught everyone she knows to be a good citizen and stand up for what they believe in.

Vanessa has proven that dedication, passion and hard work can make a difference in the world. But she has also shown that spreading love around can impact the lives of so many people for the better.

Make a difference and stand up for what is important. This is ultimately the message that Vanessa Zak's efforts and love for her brother express.

Everyone can make a difference in the world. You just need to summon the courage to voice the desire to do so.

To learn more about Vanessa Zak's mission, visit <http://www.citynews.ca/2013/01/10/the-inside-story-teen-on-a-mission-to-end-the-r-word/>

To view similar campaigns, visit <http://www.r-word.org/> or <https://twitter.com/EndTheWord>

Help make a difference for those with special needs by joining the R-Word campaign and supporting the people promoting it.

"Spread the word, to end the word."

Subhangi Anandarajah is a Grade 10 student at Stouffville District Secondary School.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Speak up early about special needs

Re: Try these family tips to launch school year, parenting column by Sara Dimerman, Aug. 15.

In addition to Ms Dimerman's timely tips for preparing kids for school, in the case of special needs, I would suggest it would also be prudent to request a meeting with the teacher to go over important management and care of the child, since school administration may change, school records may not contain up-to-date information and changes may have occurred over the summer.

In the case of allergies for example, the teacher would appreciate information about how to spot reactions to a particular food or scent effectively and will be able to forward this information to rotary teachers and administrators.

Given that a child may only have a 15-minute window to have an Epi-Pen administered before a possibly fatal reaction, it is vital to share this information with

the people who see the child most often.

As an administrator with one of our school boards, I appreciate the need for up-to-date medical information and actively encourage parents to meet with teachers as early as possible to avoid any misunderstandings.

I would also urge caregivers to continuously model the use of kind words and gestures, which go a long way to reducing the effects of insensitivity and exclusion in our schools and society.

The violence of sharp words, the pain of being brushed off, are at the heart of the bullying problems we face.

I have witnessed this kind of behaviour many times in grocery stores, parking lots and more in our relatively affluent Thornhill area.

By being generous and courteous, we give the gift of compassionate behavior to our children.

Regarding academics, the best way to motivate our children in school is by improving their attitude to school.

We can easily do this by speaking well of the admin-

istrators and teachers and by demonstrating respect toward teachers and the curriculum.

Children pick up everything, even when they're not in proximity.

Of course, disagreements can happen, but they should not detract from the overall respect we hold for educational institutions.

If we follow these steps, our children will be more disposed to behaving well, focus more on instructions and complete work more fully so as to be recognized both at home and at school.

PETER DEBORAN
THORNHILL

Flowers appreciated

I wish to thank Maureen O'Halloran of the Town of Whitchurch-Stouffville for taking such good care of Stouffville's beautiful flowers.

As a result of her hard work and dedication, we get to enjoy a wonderful array of colours downtown.

WENDY STINSON
STOUFFVILLE

905-640-2612
Fax 905-640-8778
Class 1 800 743 3353

DISTRIBUTION
905-294-8244

EDITOR IN CHIEF
Debora Kelly
dkelly@yrmg.com

DIRECTOR, BUSINESS
ADMINISTRATION
Robert Lazaruko

DIRECTOR,
REGIONAL PRODUCTS
AND CLASSIFIED
Debra Weller

DIRECTOR,
PRODUCTION
Jackie Smart

DIRECTOR,
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Tanya Pacheco

DIRECTOR,
MARKETING AND SALES
DEVELOPMENT
Gord Paolucci

Editor
Jim Mason
jmason@yrmg.com

Advertising Manager
Dave Williams
dwilliams@yrmg.com

Circulation
Co-ordinator
Daphne Lewis

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