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Kids prove they can 'give' back to their community

Cynthia Reason
Etobicoke Guardian

A group of Martingrove Gardens kids are getting the Hollywood North treatment in recognition of their efforts at revitalizing the dilapidated playground in their neighbourhood park.
Next Tuesday, the participating students from Transfiguration of Our Lord Catholic School will make their debut on the small screen when the new show Giver premieres on TVOKids. The half-hour program will showcase the kids' transformational work to update their rusted old playground at Martingrove Gardens Park into a vibrant new play zone.

"I'm really excited. I thought I would never get an opportunity like this," said eight-year-old Mikayla Ballieram, one of the team of kids who helped to design and build a nature-inspired playground with a beetle climber, a snail game, a new garden, a gazebo, and a birdhouse.

"Before, there was this rickety old climber thingamagjiggy and this slide that always got hot in the summer so it kind of burned people. It was scary. Now it's really cool."

Filmed over three days last August, the Etobicoke episode of Giver will premiere on TVO Tuesday, June 19 at 6:30 p.m.

The show, co-produced by TVO and Sinking Ship Entertainment, is aimed at engaging kids across Ontario to volunteer their time building playgrounds in their communities, said TVO's creative head of Children's Media Patricia Ellingson.

"Giver shows what kids can do when given the chance to make a difference," she said. "This series is about 'kid power,' working as a team, civic engagement, and the importance of helping to make your community the best it can be. Giver proves that when given the opportunity, kids can and will do amazing things."

With just "a little bit of help" from the adults, the kids were able to try their hands at sawing, painting, and even had the chance to try operating an excavator.

"We were painting, and putting sand in, and putting wood chips, and putting gardens in," said Virginia Capobianco, 7. "Now the park is awesome! There are no more big line-ups, it's not boring, and it's exciting."

While it was three days of "very sweaty" work, Veronica Chewins, 7, said it was well worth it.

"Before, whenever my mom said 'who wants to go to the park?' I'd say 'not this park, it's horrible.' Now when she asks, I say 'I want to go here!'" she said with smile. "I like it a lot. It's my favourite."

The work is far from done, though, said Margaret Galati, one of three parent founders of the EMBRACE (Essential Maintenance Bringing Revitalization All Can Enjoy) Martingrove Gardens Park group.

For two years, Galati, Karen Ewing, and Natalie Moore have been working with the city, organizing fundraisers and challenging private business donors to help out in order to collect the money necessary to improve their park for their kids.

While many in the community have stepped up - Gazzola Paving pitched in with a pathway, Plant World planted a rose garden, and RE/MAX's Monica Thapar donated $5,000 towards new benches and other upgrades - Galati said the group is always seeking new funding sources to keep up with new equipment requests from the kids.

"It's such a big park and we have so many kids here, we'd like to do a lot more," she said. "The kids need more."

On 10-year-old Daniel Senior's wish list for the park is a bigger slide. Charlotte Chewins, 10, wants a new teeter-totter. Eight-year-old Jorge Eyzaguirre loves showing off his acrobatics on the new beetle climber and thinks another one is in order. John Ewing, 8, thinks a park merry-go-round would be "awesome."

And they're all willing to help out to make those dreams a reality, said Galati.

Many of the kids, she noted, have worked tirelessly selling fudge and chocolate bars to raise money, while still others have helped out at the various fundraisers the group has held over the last two years.

"When we hear about some of the costs, us adults sometimes get a little discouraged. But then the kids come in and say 'we can do it!' So it gives us the encouragement to keep on going," she said.

EMBRACE's next fundraiser - a barbecue and bazaar - is being held this Saturday, June 16 from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. at Westway Christian Church, 6 Kilburn Place. All are invited to attend.

To find out more about EMBRACE and the work being done at Martingrove Gardens Park, go to

www.embracemggp.blogspot.ca/

Anyone wishing to get involved or make a donation to the park is asked to email karen.embracemggp@gmail.com

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