

Each doing their part; Students at Westmount High are learning firsthand how if everyone does a little bit to keep the environment clean, we are all one step closer to making a difference

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Publication info: The Gazette ; Montreal, Que. [Montreal, Que]16 Sep 2008: D.12.

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There's a saying that goes, "Many hands make light work."

And it's true. With more than 100 hands pulling together, a group of Westmount High students made a painless task out of picking up all the stray litter in a local park one school day morning last week.

In the process, they connected as a crew, while performing a valuable service for the community.

"I'm feeling really good that I'm doing something for the environment," said Grade 8 student Celina Gribbon, 13.

"And it's good to be with your friends, too, while you're doing it."

The Grade 7 and 8 students got busy tossing trash into their garbage bags while setting recyclables aside for their big blue bin. With their backs hunched over and eyes focused on the ground, the 50-plus students found things like discarded scraps of paper, hardened nuggets of gum, and abandoned spring-water containers.

"There are cigars and plastic bottles and snack wrappers and everything," said Grade 7 student Leily Ferreira, adding: "It's much better to put it in the garbage instead of just throwing it down."

But the students had their work cut out for them. After all, pollution is not a major problem in Westmount Park, thanks to the municipality's efficient public works department.

"This is actually a pretty clean park," said Charlotte Robertson, 12, a Grade 7 student whose trash bag was less than half full after 45 minutes of picking up litter. "But some other parks are really, really dirty. It's getting really bad. There's so much garbage and stuff."

But the garbage was there, if you looked hard enough. As 13-year-old Grade 8 student Melanie Williams-Johnson said after finding a reasonable amount of litter, "Sometimes people shoot stuff around."

But you can't always count on that castaway stuff being completely harmless. Litter can be unhealthy or unsafe to pick up, so the students were each issued a new pair of protective work gloves to wear and were told what to do if they encountered a potentially hazardous piece of trash.

"If a student sees needles or glass, we ask an adult to put it in the garbage," said Ferreira, 12. "An adult can just pick it up and throw it in the recycling bin if it belongs there, or in the garbage."

It was impressive to see the students caring for the park. Maybe it was the nice weather. Maybe it was the chance to break from their in-class academic routine. But they worked on their task with determination and a healthy contempt for pollution. But why?

"Because nobody wants to live in a dirty neighbourhood," said 13-year-old Grade 8 student Aaliyah Corbin.

According to at least one member of the Westmount High staff, these students are typical of a new generation that believes in caring for their surroundings.

"In the past, many people threw their garbage on the ground and didn't think about it," said Westmount High vice-principal Steven Erdelyi. "Now, people are thinking - students especially - about where that garbage will end up."

"Garbage that goes into landfill ends up sitting there for hundreds of years. And right now, students are the ones thinking about recycling. They are the ones who, at home, are encouraging their parents to recycle, making sure they have a blue bin, and they're pushing the school to do more recycling. And that's what we need."

As the students were busy picking up, passers-by were strolling through the park. None of them appeared to be littering. So who are the culprits who dump their trash for all to see?

"It's people who don't care about the environment," ventured Nisha Patel, a 12-year-old Grade 7 student.

"They're really too lazy to get up and look for a garbage or a recycling bin or wait till they get home. People should be responsible for their own garbage. If the environment is clean, you don't have to worry about it, and there wouldn't be so many people trying to pick up the garbage and everything."

Twelve-year-old Jaeun Yoon found several plastic water bottles, which can be recycled, but remarked that there seemed to be no containers set aside for the public to put them in.

"We should recycle them," said the Grade 7 student, "but unfortunately, there are no recycling bins, so people are throwing them in the garbage."

So she dropped her recovered bottles into a blue bin that the students themselves had remembered to borrow from the school for the day. It's no surprise, after all, that young people are among the most enthusiastic of recyclers.

"If you recycle paper, that means cutting down less trees, and trees are good for the environment," said Grade 8 student Stefannie Santos, 14. "We have enough global warming, we don't need more. And we're seeing that the environment's getting worse and worse on the news. So we're trying to change that."

Like many students her age, Brie-Anna Bernini recycles at home. So removing paper, plastic and unbroken glass from the garbage stream just makes sense to her.

"It's better if you recycle," said the 14-year-old Grade 8 student. "My whole building recycles. We have, like, 20 recycling bins downstairs in the garbage room. Everyone brings their cans or bottles and they put them in downstairs."

Joseph Paliotti, 12, found some recyclable paper and plastic bags in the park, as well as a few things destined for the garbage. He says that kids need a safe and tidy place to play, but that cleaning up also helps the big picture.

"It matters to the environment and to keep our planet clean," said the Grade 7 student.

Fellow Grade 7 student Yee Jing Chow, 12, agreed that keeping public spaces clean is part of a way of life that matters today and tomorrow.

"It's better for the future to keep it cleaner," he said. "It will be better for our grandchildren if we have any." And while their cleanup efforts may have centred on just one city park, the students sensed that they were making a difference to the world around them.

"It's good to start small," said Grade 7 student Aya Hijazi, 12. "And then later on you can take bigger steps." But does cleaning up a local park really help make the world a better place?

"Yes," said 12-year-old Thomas Whitfield. "Because the more people that help out - from a small city, to a big city like New York - it adds up to be the whole world. Because when someone starts, then it goes around and around, and eventually global warming will stop."

Twelve-year-old George Vasilopanagos agreed 100 per cent.

"It all starts small," said the Grade 7 student. "From cleaning up a park, it shows an example of cleaning up cities."

Not to mention that the whole project was meaningful and fun.

"It's a great experience," said Grade 8 student Lesley Bonell, 13.

What Do You Think?

What are you doing to keep your world clean?

Write and tell us. Send a note, cartoon, even a photograph, as long as it arrives by Friday morning. Feel free to include your own STORY IDEAS.

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Credit: J.D. GRAVENOR; Freelance

Illustration

Colour Photo: ALLEN MCINNIS, THE GAZETTE / Westmount High School students Stefannie Santos (left to right), Lesley Bonell, Celina Gribbon and Brie-Anna Bernini pick up litter in Westmount Park. ;; Caption:

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