ART *of* LIVING

Andrew Teel raises funds and awareness for youth in need

Teen Spirit

BY VANESSA HRVATIN

PHOTOGRAPH BY TANYA GOEHRING

ON DECEMBER 24, 2014, 12-year-old Andrew Teel made his way toward a park in Vancouver's troubled Downtown Eastside neighbourhood. There, he joined a group of volunteers and headed out to deliver red-and-white stockings stuffed with personal care items—gloves, toothbrushes, water—to homeless people in the area.

Andrew's mother, Sandy, had encouraged her son to pick a fun family activity to do before Christmas rolled around, and this was Andrew's. Having been in the foster care system until the age of six, Andrew knew what it was like to dread the holiday season—and to feel forgotten.

The following year he fundraised enough money to fill 30 stockings, but the organization that had led the initiative no longer existed. After a series of phone calls, Sandy finally found a place that would accept her son's donation: Covenant House Vancouver, which helps street youth.

Andrew knows that many children with histories similar to his aren't as fortunate. "If I hadn't met my mom and dad, I would have run away by now and ended up homeless," he says. "I want people to see kids on the street the same way they see any other kid."

Even Andrew was surprised by the success of his next endeavour. In 2016, the teen decided to raise money for Covenant House. He used a Pringles chip can to collect toonies at his Coquitlam, B.C., high

school, and created an online donation page called "Twoonies for Teens." His modest goal: $100.

Less than a year later, Andrew has collected nearly $50,000.

Now 15, Andrew describes his time in foster care as "really awful," an ordeal that only came to an end a decade ago when he met Sandy, who ran a local daycare. He'd noticed her hugging her charges as she dropped them off at school and decided to find out more.

"He tugged on my sleeve and asked me why I was hugging the kids, then asked if he could have a hug too," Sandy recalls. Shortly thereafter, Sandy and her husband, Mark, found out Andrew was in foster care and decided to adopt him. By June 2008, he finally had a family.

More than 1,100 youth aged 16 to 24, at least half of whom have spent time in foster care, come through the doors of Covenant House Vancouver every year. The organization's offerings include outreach and drop-in services such as counselling, meals and a residential program.

Andrew has done a great deal more than simply raise money for youth in crisis. "By sharing his story, Andrew has helped humanize the issue of homelessness and being in care," says Jennifer Hall, a development officer at Covenant House Vancouver. She adds that everyone at the organization, from the youth to the staff, was excited as donations started pouring in: "There was a feeling of amazement that someone so young could make such an impact."

The attention he's received has been unexpected and a bit overwhelming, says the teen—he doesn't like being in the spotlight. But Andrew understands the value of disclosing his personal experience and says it's "encouraging" to know he's making a difference for at-risk youth.

This fall, Andrew focused on warmth, hitting up schools in Coquitlam to put out boxes into which people could drop off new or used hoodies, which he then handed over to Covenant House.

As for Twoonies for Teens, the Teel family hopes donations will keep coming in. But if they don't, Sandy says that's okay too.

"It's never been a business of raising money," she says. "This is just Andrew following his heart." Ⓡ

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