

Phelps Helps celebrates 10-year anniversary

By Cassie MacDonell
Local Journalism Initiative

The municipality of Stanstead has a high school graduation rate of 51 per cent, one of the lowest in Quebec. In 2012, Phelps Helps was created to combat this high drop-out rate.

“Our co-founders Cathérine Van der Linden and Jeanie Markwick just couldn’t understand how that (statistic) was possible, and it didn’t sit well with them. They’re kind of Type A go-getters, and they wanted to look at what could be done,” said Phelps Helps Programs Director Katy Lowry, who has been part of the organization since its inception.

Ten years ago, Phelps Helps had seven participants total. Now, after 10 years of serving the community, the organization has around 400 participants a year.

“We started by talking to all of the stakeholders involved. Meeting with the school, meeting with the mayor, finding out what was going on. What was the root of why so many kids were dropping out of school from (Stanstead)?” she said. On the Phelps Helps website, language skills, vulnerability, deprivation, isolation, stigma, and lack of role models are listed as reasons why the Stanstead area has higher dropout rates.

Lowry explained that the group came up with the idea of organically offering after-school help.

“We started with high school students, but within a few weeks of working with high school students, the difficulties they were having were much deeper rooted. I wanted to go earlier,” she said, referring to elementary aged children. “The key for me was to go with early intervention.”

Now, Phelps Helps offers a range of programming for children, teens, and adults in English and French, free of charge.

More than a tutoring service, Phelps Helps also integrates skills such as leadership, study skills, learning skills, physical education, literacy, and healthy lifestyles into programming. “What we really

saw was there was a lack of pride in their community, so integrating these kinds of mini lessons into our approach has been the evolution,” she said.

Phelps Helps participants appreciated the mix of social and educational opportunities. “Even if I didn’t have homework, I would still come have snacks and enjoy time with my friends,” said Kaisha Goodsell, a past participant of Phelps Helps. This summer, she is working at Phelps Helps before the commencement of her Elementary Education degree at Bishop’s University, having recently graduated from Champlain College. Since a young age, she had aspirations to become a teacher.

“I’m the first one to graduate college out of my family. In my head, I thought I was going to finish high school and that’s it. I was going to just find a job after that. But with going to Phelps, it pushed my confidence. I got better grades, I got help,” said Goodsell.

Goodsell began going to Phelps Helps when she was around 14 years old. She made the decision to attend when Lowry approached students on her bus and spoke about the free tutoring and snacks available at Phelps Helps. When Goodsell’s bus arrived in Stanstead, she followed Lowry’s advice. The rest is history. “For the next four years, I came to Phelps and they helped us with our tutoring,” she said.

Goodsell will organize Phelps Helps’ summer camp and be a tutor in a one-on-one environment. She explained that this work will both allow her to give back to the community and help her with her goals of becoming a great educator. “I wanted to see if I was going to like (teaching children) first, and so far I do, so it gives me hope for when I go to Bishop’s,” she said. “Every child can succeed (at Phelps Helps) if they put their mind to it.”

Joshua Macleod, another past participant, began attending Phelps Helps around Grade 3 or 4. “I think I’ve gotten the comment of ‘well you’re smart, why do you go to Phelps’ quite a few times. I don’t think those



PHOTOS COURTESY OF PHELPS HELPS

A tutor helps a student at Phelps Helps in 2021.

people understand what Phelps really is. It’s more than just homework help. It’s a place you can do homework, but it’s almost a family kind of thing,” he said.

In elementary school, he thought Phelps Helps was a fun space to do activities, but soon appreciated the educational side of the organization as well when he transitioned into high school. “Once I got to high school, homework piles up, so Phelps was a great way to take care of that,” he said.

Lisa Smith, Phelps Helps tutoring volunteer, board member, and Stanstead College teacher, has been involved with the organization since its inception. Stanstead College wanted to help kids in the town that were struggling in school. After meeting with Van der Linden and Markwick, she pledged to help in any way she could. “I understand the problem. I raised my kids in this town, I taught 18 years in public school so I know what the issues are. I also know there’s a reputation the kids from Stanstead have when they go to (Alexander) Galt,” she said.

“It’s crazy to see how much (Phelps Helps) has grown and to see the

kids who have grown through the program and been successful,” she said, mentioning a recent run-in with a high school graduate she worked with that will go on to do nursing at Champlain College next year. “I see them come back and be productive members of the community.”

Looking to the future, Lowry explained that agility and flexibility has been the key to operating such a successful organization, and Phelps Helps will continue to operate with these values in mind. “Every program was built off the need that we saw. The relationships have always been with the kids, and seeing what worked,” she said.

Moving forward, Lowry explained there will be a focus on high school students who may be struggling after the pandemic. “We spent a lot of this year really understanding the challenges that they are facing, the fallout of the pandemic,” she said.

From July 22 to 24, Phelps Helps’ annual softball tournament will kick off the celebrations of the organization’s tenth year. “It’s a really fun event that has really found a place in the community,” said Lowry.

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An early photo taken when Phelps Helps began its programming.



Participants had a great time at the 2019 Phelps Helps softball tournament. The July 2022 tournament will kick-off celebrations of the 10th year of Phelps Helps.