

Curtis Quan, Volunteer Piano Teacher, Vincent Massey Public School



As soon as he started his first year of university, Curtis Quan registered to volunteer in schools through the Ottawa Volunteers in Education program. We thought—Wow, impressive, a first year biomedical science student volunteering during the day to help others—and assumed Curtis would be a volunteer science tutor. However, Curtis wanted to be a volunteer piano teacher for the Heart of the City Piano Program. As it turns out, this very interesting and passionate young man is a gifted teacher!

University of Ottawa (uOttawa) student volunteers run the Heart of the City Piano Program (HCPP) in Ottawa. The mission of HCPP is simple: make music accessible to every child. HCPP strives to provide the opportunity to discover music through piano lessons to children identified by their schoolteachers, by providing them with piano lessons, given at their school by volunteers. Curtis is one of 32 volunteer piano teachers assisting in six OCDSB schools.

Curtis reflected on the question, “What motivated you to volunteer in schools,” then answered, “I was very motivated in high school to volunteer but we could only volunteer on evenings and weekends. uOttawa does a great job of promoting student volunteerism, to explore and get involved in the community. In university, you have free time during the day to volunteer so I immediately signed up to be a piano teacher.” (During our conversation, I

also discovered he teaches badminton to children as well as volunteers to assist in a school based robotics program.)

Curtis is passionate about music, how it fits into history, into everything we do. “I really like teaching. I feel very honoured to teach children piano and the wonderful language of music. As a child, I was very lucky that my parents exposed me to so many opportunities. The piano resonated with me. It’s another language—it’s a universal language; a language of emotions. You can tell a story with music, going from jubilation to despair all with music. What’s incredible about piano is that you are the master of this story telling—it’s very profound. I am lucky to have this opportunity to expose children to piano. Music is truly transcendental.” Curtis, a natural teacher, went on to give me a lesson in the romantic music period easily relating how the Impressionist style of painting influenced music of the period; how the culture at the time was crazy about all things Asian, which also influenced musicians who incorporated Asian themes in their music. “I love studying music. You get to study how music has developed over the centuries—how the language of music has evolved just like English has evolved over time. Music is a time machine.”

Curtis is also passionate about science. Curtis shares how he has always been in the ‘math and science’ stream in school. After graduation, Curtis hopes to go to medical school. “I have a lot of different passions; studying science and math for years would be so dry. Volunteering provides lots of interest and fun to my studies, making new friends, and learning new things. I also volunteer with a large group of students in the International Genetically Engineered Machine (iGEM) competition. It is so cool especially since last year we had a team of 30 compete and went on to the MIT world competition! ” (iGEM is a worldwide synthetic biology competition that was initially aimed at undergraduate university students, but has since expanded to include divisions for high school students and entrepreneurs.)

Volunteers often say they get more from volunteering than they give and Curtis is no exception. “What have I learned about myself? I have learned that I am really passionate about music: that I like teaching and that I understand how children learn. I want to share and pass on what I learn as effectively as possible to future generations so they can create and invent something new.”

I asked Curtis to relate a poignant story about one of his students. “In the fall, I had just started to teach piano to a young boy. At Christmas time, he asked his Mom for a keyboard! I was impressed because he could have asked for a cool toy—that was very memorable for me—that he wanted a keyboard of his own.” When asked if Curtis could see the impact of his volunteer work he was modest, “Yes...I only see them during piano lessons but I definitely see improvements; they want to learn more advanced music.”

Curtis could go on for hours about music, science, history, philosophy...but needing to wrap up the interview we end with his final comments, “I think volunteering is a learning experience in itself. You will learn things you didn’t know about yourself. You get to choose and share what you are passionate about. You really get to explore; your work is your work

but volunteering you get to have fun and open children's minds to other experiences in a fun way. For sure, I am coming back next year!"

With his unique combination of skills and talents, enthusiasm, positive outlook, and inherent teaching abilities, I think Curtis will be great at whatever he decides for his career!

The Ottawa Volunteers in Education program, a program of the Ottawa Network for Education, safely screens community volunteers for schools in Ottawa. For more information about volunteering in schools, please visit our website www.onferope.ca/ovie

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