



United Way



A dream for the future

A United Way funded program helped Sylvanna come out of her shell—and paved the way for her to attend university.

“I’ve been involved with United Way since before I was officially a member of any organizations, because my dad and all his siblings were members when they were little, too. I think it’s cool—I don’t look a lot like my dad, but when people hear my name, there’s staff members at this organization that recognize it and remember him.

I started with swimming lessons when I was around five, then my mom put me in a summer camp. Then when I was in grade seven, some staff members reached out to me and got me more involved with the other programs the organization offers. It got to a point where I was there probably four days a week! I would hang out from right after school until it closed. I did cooking classes, a leadership program and now I’m on staff.

At camp, I was always that person that was very shy when people first met me, especially when I was a kid. So, a lot of staff reached out to me and helped me get out of my comfort zone. Because I’m not really quiet! But it was really hard for me when I was younger. So, they gave me names of programs and said ‘Oh, I really think you’d be a good fit for this.’



United Way

The program that has been most helpful to me was a leadership and homework program. I actually got to meet a lot of people from my school, because I joined in grade eight, so I didn't know a lot of people going into high school. And that's how I met my now best friend. We have been friends since the start of that program, we went to high school together and we got to do so many things together in that program. We did things like city-wide cigarette butt cleanups, but sometimes we'd just meet up to do homework. Once we made pizza together, and that was really fun. It was so nice to just hang out. All of us enjoy the program so much that we stayed through it for five years.

The program is also what paved my way to go to university. Neither of my parents went to university—as of right now, I am the first person in my family to attend. I always told the staff that I didn't know what I want to do; I was always unsure. But they gave me a lot of support. We did a lot of interview sessions. And specific supervisors guided me—because a lot of my programs required essays, and I was like, 'What if this program is not for me? What if I'm not good enough?' But they would help me; they read through all my essays before I submitted them, and we brainstormed everything together. And they'd tell me, 'Don't worry, you can do this. You'll get in.'

Right now, I'm in my first year of an Integrated Science program. This is one of the programs that I had to write an essay, and a supervisor helped me. They only accepted 50 people out of all the applicants, so I really, honestly did not think I was going to get in. But the supervisor told me to just go for it. When I got in, I literally cried. I purposely applied to a collaborative program because I had such good experiences at this United Way-supported program.”



United Way



A history of helping others

Margaret's involvement in United Way dates back to the 80's and it continues to be part of her life.

"I began my career in 1988 in London, Ontario as a Business Banking trainee with TD Bank. TD was involved in a program with United Way called the "Loaned Rep" program and I was "loaned" to United Way for the duration of their annual campaign." I had no clue about the organization but off I went. Wow, what an eye-opener that was. I had no idea all the agencies that United Way supported even existed and that there was that kind of need in the community. Honestly, it was the best experience. Ever since then, it has been really important for me to donate to United Way as well as being involved with United Way or an agency it supports.

In fact, when I first moved to my current city, I reached out to United Way to see what I could do to help. They were kicking off a campaign and I was able to assist in making some calls on the leadership giving side. But when that was done, I approached the CEO at the time and said, 'I just moved to this community, I really want to become more involved. Can you recommend an agency that United Way supports that could use my skillset?' She told me about an organization for grieving children that didn't even have a full-time or part-time executive director; I think they had one paid staff member. I was on the board for four years and saw the budget go from \$200,000 to what it is now—almost one million dollars. It was an extremely rewarding experience.



United Way

I think United Way's meaning is twofold. As a resident of this community, I believe it acts as a safety net. It's always there for you. It supports everything from food banks to sexual assault shelters to assistance with mental health, you name it. When you go through the list of agencies supported in our region it's truly incredible.

But on the other side, having been on the board of directors of one of those agencies, wow, it was an important safety net for us, too. Honestly, there were times where we thought, 'Well, at least we're starting off this year and we know we have the United Way's help.'"