

Peace Bus rolls through region on cross-country volunteer trip

Waterloo Region Record

NEW HAMBURG — They started in Halifax by dipping their feet into the cold Atlantic Ocean, and they'll finish 39 days later in Victoria with a splash in the Pacific.

From coast to coast, a group of civic-minded teens involved with Children's International Summer Villages are driving across Canada on the Peace Bus, making stops throughout the country to volunteer and learn about Canadian issues.

The Peace Bus celebrated the first 19 days of their trip with a three-day stop beginning Sunday in New Hamburg, the home of delegate Jessi Elgood.

Jessi, 16, was responsible for organizing activities for the teens, many of whom were visiting Waterloo Region for the first time. They spent Monday morning weeding, digging up beets and helping unpack boxes at the Mennonite Central Committee Thrift Store in New Hamburg before touring CIGI in Waterloo to learn about local and global initiatives toward peace.

The Eastwood student said that so far, the trip has taught her about the generosity and diversity of Canadians.

"My main purpose in getting involved with the Peace Bus was to gain a better understanding of Canada," Jessi said from the garden outside of the thrift store. "You don't have to go international to see different cultures."

The trip has included both fun events and eye-opening experiences, Jessi said. The group takes part in a cultural activity at every stop, and she organized a night at the Stratford Festival to see the musical Tommy. "That was amazing. But then I remember volunteering at the Old Brewery Mission in Montreal, one of the oldest soup kitchens in Canada. There were people in business suits coming in. It just changes your understanding of what hunger or poverty looks like. A face doesn't always tell the whole story."

The teens have also volunteered at an organic farm in St-Aubert, Que., and worked at a sustainability centre in New Brunswick, said Peace Bus driver Ally Splett.

"This trip is shaping people and giving them a sense of what's out there," Splett, 24, said. "The diversity of activities really gets them interested in new things and ways of giving back."

Both Jessi and Splett admitted to having some initial hesitation about the trip.

"I just pictured this bus full of sweaty people and no showers because we do a lot of camping when we're not at homestays. I was a little scared about the challenges," Jessi said. "But it's been such an incredible experience, and the bus travel is really fun."

Splett agreed. "I was really nervous to be a driver at first. I imagined my hands glued to the steering wheel," she laughed. Splett shares driving duties with another volunteer, Reuben DeBoer.

"We try to keep the drives as short as possible, and seeing the change in landscapes as we make our way across the country has been phenomenal."

The group also makes sure to stop at landmarks like the world's largest axe in Nackawic, N.B.

For their stay in Waterloo Region, the 12 teens and two drivers are being hosted by Jessi's family in New Hamburg.

Mom Cory Veenhof said putting up 14 people for three days has been a breeze.

"They're a great, responsible group of kids and we're so glad we had a chance to do this," Veenhof said. "Jessi's always been one to stand behind everyone and get involved, but we've loved seeing some of the changes in her already after two weeks. She's speaking out a bit more, taking more initiative and realizing that, hey, she can do something really positive."

For youth and adults interested in getting involved with the Peace Bus and other programs, visit the Children's International



Summer Villages Waterloo chapter website at www.ciswaterloo.org. (<http://www.ciswaterloo.org>.) People can follow the progress of the Peace Bus on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/PeaceBus> and Twitter at @PeaceBusC2C.