

BOARDS MAKING A DIFFERENCE

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LGBTQ AWARD A FIRST FOR SURREY SCHOOLS

Contributor:

The Surrey-North Delta Leader

When a close friend was asked to leave home after telling her parents she was gay, Neelam Sandhar felt she needed to find a way to make change.

Now, for her work promoting tolerance at her school and in her community, Sandhar has been awarded the inaugural LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgendered and questioning) Scholarship at Princess Margaret Secondary.

It's the first award of its kind in Surrey.

The LGBTQ Scholarship will be presented annually to a student who believes people should be free to live without fear or discrimination.

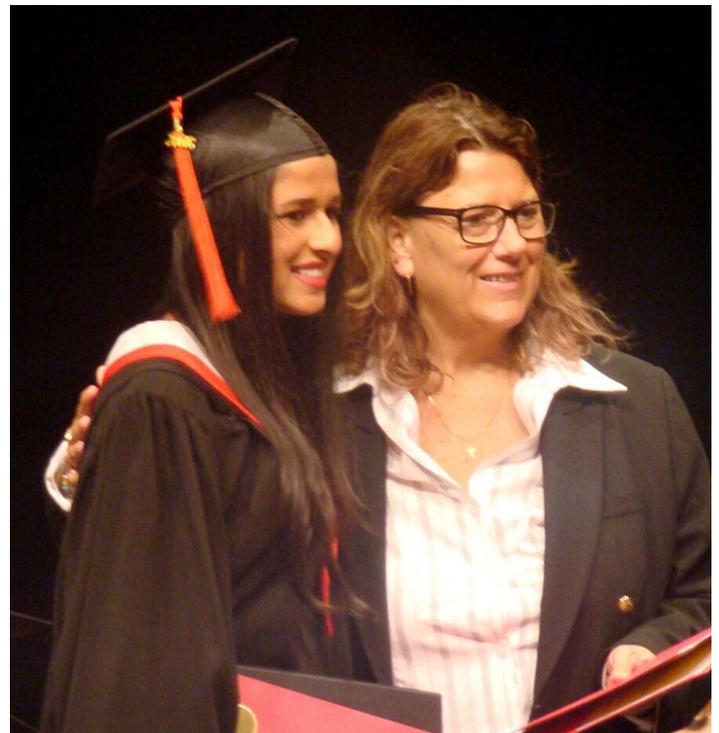
Sandhar, 18, accepted the award, along with a cheque for \$500, on May 26 in front of staff, classmates and her family at Princess Margaret. Sandhar also won a scholarship for Punjabi language studies.

Identifying as a straight ally of the LGBTQ community, Sandhar has been a supporter of equality and acceptance at the school.

During her Social Justice 12 class, students took on subjects throughout the year they felt passionate about.

Sandhar helped organize the school's first-ever pride walk, hanging posters and raising the pride flag at the school.

"For me, it's about equality and people being able to live their lives freely, without anybody putting them



Neelam Sandhar receives the first-ever LGBTQ scholarship at Princess Margaret Secondary from school youth worker Sandy Weames.

down just because they're a little bit different," she said. "If there's people out there that identify as LGBTQ, instead of shutting them off and looking at them as some odd person, they should be accepting and realizing they are unique and they need to be accepted in society."

She said although the vast majority of people are supportive of her work, some are still a little

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uneasy with her views. However, she feels the tide is changing among her classmates, her neighbourhood and her own South Asian community.

But Sandhar said there's still a long way to go. A close friend who recently "came out" to her parents had to leave her home and now lives in foster care in Vancouver, Sandhar said.

"Coming from a 'brown' family, a lot of the elders in the Sikh community are still holding back from accepting this kind of thing," said Sandhar. "I thought it might make people think that if she can do it (stand up), then what's the big deal? We can accept them too."

The bursary Sandhar received will go towards tuition at Kwantlen Polytechnic University. She has a goal of becoming a social worker and a counsellor.

"This award means we're moving forward," said Princess Margaret youth worker Sandy Weames.

"And it shows the evolution of the community and the school."

James Chamberlain, a former FD Sinclair Elementary teacher and currently a vice-principal in Vancouver, will be funding the annual award, along with his husband.

"I worked in the district (Surrey) for a long time and we wanted to enable young people to be change makers," said Chamberlain. "And who better to start creating the change than people within the community?"

Chamberlain led the fight in the late 1990s to allow three children's books depicting same-sex parents to be used as classroom resources in the Surrey School District. The fight went all the way to the Supreme Court of Canada, where it was decided the school board could not ban the gay-themed books.