



Donor Profile

Ms. Willows Book Award

Ms. Willows believed in every child and dedicated much of her time to helping all students reach their full potential. While our community lost a beloved teacher, wife, friend and mentor to cancer on April 9, 2016, Ms. Willows' kind heart and vision will continue to flourish in St. James-Assiniboia School Division.

Nicole Willows, born in 1986, grew up attending schools in St. James-Assiniboia. She pursued many passions throughout her life, such as music, soccer and travelling, but perhaps her greatest passion of all, upon dreaming of the occupation since she was six years old, was teaching.

Ms. Willows started her career with St. James-Assiniboia School Division as a substitute teacher in 2009 and soon-after, gained a full-time teaching position at Crestview School. She built a strong foundation and a family at Crestview made up of staff, students and their families. When Ms. Willows found out she had colon cancer in the fall of 2013, she did everything she could to remain in her classroom with her students as they brought her so much joy and happiness. After battling the disease for over two years, Ms. Willows passed away the week following spring break in April of 2016. During this extremely difficult time, her husband, Matthew Creighton, found a unique and meaningful way to honour her life and continue her efforts towards helping students achieve their educational goals.

"I was sitting around my sister's place, going through the motions of what happened and how giving Nicole was, I was trying to think of something I could do to take away from all of the negative stuff that was going on," said Matthew, referring to one week after her passing. "I thought of her students and what I could do for them because stuff was pouring in from them and I was trying to, not only get myself healed, but do what I could for other people."

Matthew started a GoFundMe page called *Ms. Willows Books for Deserving Students* approximately a week after she passed away with the hope of raising enough funds to present each student at Crestview School with a book during "I love to Read" month in February each year. While Ms. Willows enjoyed teaching all subject areas at the Grade 2/3 level, she particularly loved literature and always prioritized reading as an important part of her classroom structure.

"She loved it all but reading was definitely one of her favourites," said Matthew.

Ms. Willows was also involved in the reading recovery program in St. James-Assiniboia School Division. Matthew

settled on the idea of initiating a book award after recalling a time Ms. Willows searched to find a creative solution to help one of her students purchase a couple books that they wanted to read over the summer but could not afford. She thought it was extremely important for all of her students to have access to reading material in which they were interested in, especially during summer break, to maintain and strengthen their reading skills.

The initial goal of the online campaign was to raise \$15,000. Within 48 hours, a flood of generous donations from friends, family and community members surpassed this goal and the fund continued to grow rapidly.

"A lot of people were emailing me, you know friends and family, saying how much it is helping them focusing on such a good thing coming out of such a tough time," explained Matthew.

Approximately a week after the GoFundMe campaign launched, Matthew received a text message from a family friend about a lemonade stand nearby. One of Ms. Willows students was selling cookies and lemonade and created a poster to let her patrons know their contributions would be going towards a GoFundMe page in support of her favourite teacher who passed away from cancer. Matthew stopped by the lemonade stand to meet the young girl and as he connected with her family, learned of how his wife taught all three children in their family.

"It was the little things like that that were pretty moving and it was a pretty cool thing," said Matthew.

As the campaign quieted down, Matthew connected with Crestview School Principal, Mrs. Moffatt. Mrs. Moffatt helped make the connection between the GoFundMe campaign and the St. James Scholarship Foundation to help ensure the fund wouldn't deplete itself and could be used in perpetuity. After paying a small fee to use the online platform, a donation of \$28,726 was made to the St. James Scholarship Foundation to establish the Ms. Willows Book Award.

In June, 2017, all of the students at Crestview School will be receiving the Ms. Willows Book Award for the first time. Mrs. Moffatt says each student chose a book they would like to receive from more than 50 titles based on their interest and reading level.

While Matthew organized the campaign during such a pivotal period, he attributes it all to his incredible wife.

"This is exactly what Nicole would want and what Nicole would do," said Matthew. "I would give her all the credit."