

Actor Turned Philanthropist

Using his talent for acting to give something back

by **Helen Fratton**, Mississauga

My son, Austin, is 16 and is an up-and-coming actor. He currently plays one of the leads, Auzzie, on *Debra!* which airs on Family Channel, as well as a character named Andy on YTV's *Life With Boys*, but that's not what I wanted to talk about. Too often we hear about all the negative stuff young actors are up to and I wanted to share how, through acting, Austin has become more aware of the world around him and has become a budding philanthropist.

It started when he was eight years old, when he did an anti-bullying public service announcement (PSA) called "Tell Someone" and, to this day, it still runs on many children's channels. He began speaking out about it, but as he became a little older, he was overwhelmed by some of the emails he would get. He'd receive very sad stories of abuse and kids asking him: "What should I do?" to the point where I had to take over because it was too heartbreaking for him. Austin never would have been exposed to what real bullying was and how often it happens if it weren't for acting in this commercial. He became a much more compassionate person for it.

Cyberbullying is what really gets him going now! He generally doesn't spend a lot of time on all the social networks as he has seen how hurtful people can be. "When someone can hide behind the screen of a computer, they can say things they normally wouldn't if they were face to face," Austin says. Words and videos can be dangerous and powerful and once they're online, they can spread so fast.

Austin has always donated his time to doing

charity work; he says that "As someone who young kids may listen to, I have to speak up." He also enjoys working with film school students: "One day, they may be the next Bruce McDonald," he said about one of his favourite directors he has worked with, who is also Canadian.

Recently, he has been playing a recurring role on a TV series called *Living in Your Car*, on TMN/HBO network. Although it is a comedy, it really opened his eyes to homelessness. Austin plays a character named Scott who lives in a van with his mom. While researching for the role, Austin was blown away by how much poverty is right under his nose. He was totally thrown when he found out that we have trailer parks in our own city, tucked away in little corners, and people who live in cars, as they don't feel safe in shelters. What really surprised him was the fact that a lot of the kids don't use some of the programs available to them. "They don't use them because they are afraid of being labelled as 'one of those,' or being picked on," he said.

Acting has given him a lot of great opportunities to meet people, travel, learn different skills and realize how fortunate he is. I was so proud when he announced: "I have a chance to make a difference, so I want to find a charity I can work with." Eventually, we found a charity called Blessings in a Backpack that was a

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good fit. It was started in the United States by a gentleman called Stan Curtis; Hilary Duff also became a big supporter. Fortunately, Blessings has just arrived here in Canada and Austin jumped on board and is helping get the name out and known here in Canada. Austin loves the fact that the program doesn't identify the kids as being in the program: The backpacks given out are all donated, so they range from new to used, each one very different and unique.

At the beginning of the school year, each child is given their own backpack and on Fridays, after school, it is filled up with nutritious meals for the

weekend. Austin is doing all he can to collect backpacks. He has had school backpack drives and he held a garage sale on his 15th birthday to raise funds to buy backpacks. Every chance he gets, he tries to raise awareness about "BIB."

Austin has just finished filming a movie called *Jesus Henry Christ*, in which he played a bully. He also played a bully in *Kit Kittredge: An American Girl*. He says, "Out of all the different roles I play, being a bully is the one I am most uncomfortable with." When he was done acting as those characters, he didn't watch the final product, though he did come away with a better understanding of why people bully.

"I can see how someone who doesn't feel good about themselves could feel empowered by bullying others; it's better to have people fear you and stay close than ignore you when you have no self-esteem."

Austin is a regular kid with homework, chores and an allowance. He loves martial arts, skateboarding and hanging out at his grandparents' home in Muskoka. But he is also an actor, and being in the spotlight, he wants to make sure he is known in a positive way. Austin figures, "If we can make a difference by feeding kids and helping them have self-esteem today, maybe they won't end up being the bullies we all have to deal with later." ■



Clockwise from top left: Austin MacDonald; Austin with the cast of *Debra!*; anti-bullying PSA Austin performed in; Austin amid donated backpacks for "BIB"—blessingsinabackpack.ca.