

Christmas in July came even earlier this year

by BROCK WEIR

Well, I guess it's that time of year again ? I've got my first invitation to a so-called ?Christmas in July? event.

While I'm certainly not one to frown on fun ? and, speaking as a holiday enthusiast, these events almost always are ? it's always a bit jarring when event invitations and advertisements for Christmas in July sales roll in at this time of year when summer is still a couple of weeks away.

I know it's not the intent of these occasions, but it sometimes feels like we're almost wishing away the summer. It's not dissimilar to how so many of us wish away the winter to feel the warmth of a good, sunny July day, but these yuletide yearnings make for something of a speedbump along the way to remind us that the cold and dark of the winter is not too far away.

This year, I'm just going to roll with the punches because, truth be told, I had something of a Christmas in July experience last week ? a whole month early ? when two items that have been on my own ?grown-up Christmas list? moved that much closer to becoming reality.

In previous columns, I've often drafted up such a list as the holiday season approached ? not in hopes of what I might find under the tree or in my stocking on the morning of December 25, but rather what I would like to see unfold in the year ahead.

Between the start of this month and the end of last week, two perennial entries on my list came tantalizingly closer to coming true.

The first bolt of good news came from the Ministry of Education on June 2 when Paul Calandra, Minister of Education, announced a \$4 million investment to ?support new opportunities for high school students to build confidence, develop leadership skills, and gain meaningful real-world experience.?

So far so good ? and so far so needed and overdue in the public education sector ? but what particularly caught my attention was that this program was being delivered in partnership with two venerable organizations that are experts in this field: The Duke of Edinburgh's International Award and The King's Trust Canada.

Both of these well-regarded initiatives have been embraced by our local independent schools and one of my favorite types of human interest stories to tackle in this job is speaking to students who have completed various levels in their quest for Duke of Edinburgh gold. No single experience is similar to another and there's a lot to learn when they share what they've done.

Being a monarchist from a relatively early age, it was often frustrating to go through the public school system aware that these opportunities were available and embraced elsewhere, but were virtually unheard of in our hallowed halls.

I did my best to change that through our student newspaper, such as it was at the time, but my prose didn't exactly set the school community on fire.

Now that the programs are set to get more exposure in Ontario than ever before, it's exciting to look ahead to all students will be learning and experiencing ? and we will be a stronger Ontario for it.

?Education must prepare students not just for graduation, but for life beyond school,? said Calandra in a statement. ?When students have the opportunities to apply their learning in meaningful ways, they leave school better prepared for whatever path they choose. This investment will help more students access those experiences and build a strong foundation for the future.?

The Ministry notes that through the partnerships, students will be able to, ?enhance their adaptability and readiness for success in a

rapidly changing economy; participate in skills development activities that reflect their interests and passions, helping to build self-confidence and transferable skills they can apply in life after high school; engage in voluntary service to give back to their communities by supporting people, the environment, or charitable organizations; participate in fun, skills-building, and outdoor education programs that are designed to teach young people about critical thinking, communication, networking, problem-solving, time management, and adaptability; [and] access real-world learning to support success in an evolving labour market.?

?The King's Trust was founded by HM King Charles III in 1976 and was launched in Canada in 2011,? the Ministry notes. ?The Trust is part of an international network of charities celebrating its 50th anniversary this year and has supported 1.5 million young people in 25 countries. Its Skills Academy program is designed to help young people to build the foundational skills, such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving and adaptability.

?Celebrating its 70th anniversary this year, the Duke of Edinburgh's International Award is a globally-recognized youth development framework that supports young people to build confidence, life-skills, and purpose through real-world experiential learning both inside and outside the classroom. This program operates in more than 130 countries worldwide with over 500,000 Canadians participating since 1963.?

The other instance of good news in my book came with Prime Minister Mark Carney's announcement of a national A.I. Strategy. Much-needed all around, I was particularly heartened by the fact that this strategy includes A.I. and social media literacy components for students ? an element that has always been on my wish list and is much-needed in and of itself.

While one can only hope such programs will be made available to students in elementary and secondary schools as well, should the Provinces get on board, the Strategy includes a literacy component they argue will foster future opportunities.

The National AI Literacy Initiative will offer ?entry-level AI training for all Canadians. As part of this effort AI literacy will reach 1 million entry-level post-secondary students and train more than 3,000 educators with AI learning kits in their classrooms. Free, accessible AI learning will include practical courses and sector-relevant modules.?

?AI is here. The question is whether it will improve the lives of all Canadians or benefit only a few,? said Carney in a statement. ?AI can shorten our emergency room wait times and make a small business more competitive, if it is governed by Canadian values with a clear goal of improving the lives of all Canadians. That's why we need an ambitious new strategy: AI for All. We will build trust so that all Canadians are empowered to use this technology safely and with confidence. AI that builds Canada strong for all ? that's our mission.?

It's a good step forward, but let's keep our fingers crossed that these modules will help students also identify what's AI and what's not with ease, something that is sorely lacking in this day and age.

Perhaps this is just a pipe dream, but perhaps it is something that will work in concert with a potential social media ban for those 16-years-of-age or older. That's a column for a different week, but I remain hopeful.

While I might be able to strike more students being able to benefit from the Duke of Edinburgh Awards and the King's Trust programs from my grown-up Christmas list, with that hope in mind, I have my eraser poised over AI and social media literacy as well.

Let's see where things stand in December!