

Award winners are anything but garden-variety heroes



By Brock Weir

Despite the bright green shirts worn by many in the audience, these aren't your average, garden-variety hometown heroes.

Nearly 30 Aurora volunteers and community organizations were honoured Monday evening in the annual Community Recognition Awards. Hosted at the Aurora Seniors' Centre, 28 individuals and groups were singled out for their contributions to Aurora, many representing the Aurora Food Pantry, the Aurora Horticultural Society, and the Aurora Community Arboretum.

The annual awards ceremony also recognized many who donate their time to the Seniors' Centre itself, including George Biondic, who was recognized with the Civic Appreciation Award, not just for his work in the Centre, but his athletic career as an ultra-marathoner, still bringing home championships over the age of 60.

Joining him was 'Bud' Switzer, whose musical talent has brightened many events around Town and beyond as a 'Senior Star'.

As the duo approached the stage to receive their awards from Councillors Chris Ballard and Paul Pirri, Mr. Switzer had a song on his lips.

'Volunteerism is an indispensable element to all our municipalities,' said host Mayor Geoffrey Dawe. 'Aurora's volunteers share a common vision [to] strengthen our community and enrich the lives of our residents. They share their skills, their life experiences, all for the benefit of others. They are outstanding examples of social responsibility and models of good character.'

St. Andrew's Pots and Pins, an afterschool program for kids at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church teaching cooking and sewing skills, was singled out for Outstanding Achievement for a local Non-Profit.

Their bright shirts blazing the Aurora Community Arboretum said 'trees!' rather than 'cheese!' as their volunteers came up on stage as Community Organization of the Year.



Ms. Wojtka received her award from Councillor John Gallo. (Auroran photo by David Falconer)

'It's a great honour and it is great to be recognized because you realise that people notice what you're doing,' said Arboretum chair Irene Clement, who was also honoured for her 15 years of individual volunteerism. 'Sometimes when you're volunteering, you might feel like nobody really cares or nobody really knows, but as our trees get bigger, people are more aware of what we're trying to do!'

Sport Aurora's Ron Weese was honoured with the Bob Harman Memorial Award for people making a positive impact on Aurora's recreational life. Singled out for his work as a former club president of the Aurora Youth Soccer Club before forming Sport Aurora, he was hailed by Mayor Dawe as having 'inspired thousands of our youth' with a love of sport.

Sharing the love of sport, Mr. Biondic celebrated his award with fellow winners following the ceremony. Preparing for a 24 hour race this Saturday in Cleveland, OH, he anticipates the endeavour being about 65 per cent running and 35 per cent walking. For him, the Civic Appreciation Award was a career highlight.

'I have received awards in the running community, but here is something the Town recognizes,' he said. 'I hope it is an inspiration of all ages to dream big. You don't know how high you can go. I am shocked at what I have done over the last 10 years. Don't ever give up.'

Following the ceremonies, Debby Wojtka prepared to head home, but not before stopping off at her mother's house to show off the award. Ms. Wojtka was celebrated for her work with youth, including founding Unity House Daycare, and the Junior Youth Empowerment Program, to mentor youth of all backgrounds and religions as they grow into young adults.

'At first I didn't want to accept this award [because] I want no community recognition,' explained the mother of five. 'But when my youngest son was in Grade 8 and was graduating, he was up to win many awards and his teacher [asked], 'Should we bother nominating him? He's humble and we don't think he would accept.' I remember saying to her: 'He may not want to accept them, but I'm his mother and I want to see him accepting them.'

'I'm doing this for my mother.'

The Auroran's series on individual winners will begin next week with more from Ms. Wojtka.