

Community Recognition Awards honour 'heart and soul' of Aurora

The global pandemic has only underscored the importance of lending a hand to your friends and neighbours.

From individuals who worked overtime mobilizing their community to help stock the shelves of the Aurora Food Pantry to preserving the green spaces that were a refuge to so many, Aurora's volunteers were firmly in the spotlight as Mayor and Council presented the 2022 Community Recognition Awards.

Hosted by Neighbourhood Network Manager Erin Cerenzia at Town Hall, this year's recipients, she said, were the 'heart and soul' of the community.

'Looking at each of you, as volunteers you care so deeply and you step up to support the things you believe in regardless of personal cost,' she said. 'Each of you bring ideas, positive energy, and your valuable time and talents to your volunteering roles.'

Michael Chen, recipient of the 2022 Youth Award, was the first honouree.

YOUTH VOLUNTEER AWARD ? MICHAEL CHEN

The Youth Volunteer Award is presented to a young citizen who has made a significant contribution to their community while, at the same time, demonstrating positive leadership.

Chen, a co-chair of the Town's Youth Engagement Committee, was recognized for supporting his peers through COVID-19 by making sure there were safe avenues to earn volunteer service hours.

'Through his hard work, Michael was able to create Peer Mentors Aurora, a youth-led tutoring organization that has provided over 350 hours of free tutoring,' reads his citation. 'Michael brought on nine peers, helped develop curriculum and provided outreach for students in need. This program created by Michael provided other students with both academic support and support for their mental wellbeing on a weekly basis.'

Further volunteer work included initiatives for National Heritage Week where he interviewed Councillor Harold Kim on his experiences as a community leader.

SENIOR VOLUNTEER AWARD ? JACKIE CATTO

The Senior Volunteer Award, which honours community builders aged 55 and up, was presented to Jackie Catto, whose contributions to the Royal Victorian Order of Nursing, the Canadian Cancer Society, Aurora United Church and more are clear to anyone who has been in her orbit.

'There are some people who volunteer because they believe it is the right thing to do, then there are the rare and exceptional groups of people who show kindness because that's just who they are. It seems innate rather than learned,' reads Ms. Catto's citation. 'Jackie definitely falls into the latter category. When you receive a caring card from Jackie, it is one which you know is heartfelt, carefully worded, cherished and, yes, can even help soothe the suffering.'

GREEN AWARD ? LISSA DWYER

The Green Award is presented each year to an individual or organization that supports the protection and preservation of the environment, working towards creating a greener community.

This year's recipient, long-time Aurora resident Lissa Dwyer, an integral member of Nature Aurora and the Oak Ridges Trail

Association, is often at the forefront of local environmental initiatives ? including a local nest box program which helps monitor the health of several local species of birds.

?For the Aurora Community Arboretum, Lissa has spent countless hours planting daffodil bulbs and trees, weeding in the nursery, mulching trees, picking up garbage and other tasks. All of her efforts have contributed to keeping the Arboretum beautiful while contributing positively to Aurora's ecosystem. These specific efforts contribute to keeping the Arboretum healthy and ensures the continuous existence of many plant species.?

ARTS & CULTURE AWARD ? LINDA WELCH

The Arts & Culture Award celebrates individuals and groups who have enhanced the community through culture, music, visual, performing or literary arts ? either as creators or promoters.

This year's recipient, Society of York Region Artists (SOYRA) president Linda Welch is both.

?For the past seven years, she has led visual artists within SOYRA through challenging transitions. She has organized educational and entertaining meetings for members and has encouraged others to take on roles of responsibility within the Society. Linda is always the first at meetings, ready to greet others and keep them informed of artistic opportunities within the community. She has sought out and arranged events that enrich the artistic pursuits of artists, such as en plein air paint days, art shows, demonstrations and workshops.

?Linda Welch is truly an exemplary community leader who continues to enrich the lives of others. As President, Linda goes above and beyond the expectations of her role.?

COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP AWARD ? WELCOMING ARMS

The Community Leadership Award is presented to individuals or organizations who have ?enhanced the community through their contribution, commitment and leadership in the areas of charitable giving, civic engagement, community events or community spirit.?

Impacting the lives of hundreds of low-income residents, and those needing a helping hand, each year, the team at Welcoming Arms is this year's honouree.

?The services that Welcoming Arms offer have continued, even through the pandemic, and will continue. As an example, during the challenging times of the pandemic, they were able to quickly pivot and change their usual sit-down meal to ?take out' and ?drive through' style. They have seen the need for this support grow and the number of community members they serve increases each year.

?Every Wednesday evening, the volunteers at Welcoming Arms serve dinner to approximately 150 people from our community, allowing them a hot meal, a full belly, and great company. In addition, these volunteers also serve approximately 50 people a hot lunch every single Thursday. These efforts continued and support increased throughout the pandemic.?

GOOD NEIGHBOUR AWARD ? ALMA DURKIN

The Good Neighbour Award is presented to someone ?who embodies what it means to be a good neighbour,? celebrating the ?simple acts of kindness and compassion? that help create ?connected and vibrant neighbourhoods.?

Armed with just an iPad, this year's recipient, Alma Durkin, used her experience as a ?Land Girl? during the Second World War to mobilize her neighbourhood to support the Aurora Food Pantry at the height of the pandemic and this work has continued in her new community of the Meadows of Aurora.

In 2020 at the age of 93, [Alma] organized a food drive in her neighbourhood. She created a flyer and had a neighbour help distribute them. She contacted the Food Pantry and found out what was really needed. The drive successfully brought neighbours together and resulted in a large donation of food. This year, Alma decided to create a fundraiser (for the Pantry and the Heart & Stroke Foundation) in her new community. In honour of Valentine's Day, she knitted hearts and sold them for her neighbourhood. This created a wonderful buzz at the Meadows and brought people together. With her efforts, nearly \$600 was raised for the Food Pantry.?

COMMUNITY SAFETY AWARD ? JUDY BRUNTON

The Community Safety Award recognizes individuals dedicated to the development, promotion or support of an initiative that improves community safety.

This year's recipient, Judy Brunton, is a passionate advocate for the Canadian Mental Health Association and in supporting vulnerable community members.

Supporting CMHA is a love and passion for Judy, and this is abundantly clear when you meet her and understand what she has done for [the Canadian Mental Health Association]. She is helping to protect and literally save the lives of youth who otherwise do not have the support, money or means of seeking help.

She is a shining and hopeful light on a dark and often hidden problem in today's society and for this she deserves recognition.?

GOOD BUSINESS AWARD ? TINA'S GRILL & TOPPER'S PIZZA (TIE)

The Good Business Award honours businesses that have demonstrated corporate responsibility and community involvement.

This year's recipients, Tina's Grill and Topper's Pizza, have regularly exemplified this spirit through the years.

Tina's Grill, led by Harry, Amir and Sam Saberi and their staff have been very active in the community since their opening in 2019. Once a month, Tina's has been feeding five families in need who are nominated by the community. Even though all businesses struggled with COVID and its impact, Tina's found ways to keep in touch with the community, adjusted to the changing conditions and limitations, and still helped where needed within the community, helping building a strong, loyal following.

Recently, after a small health scare, Tina's Grill answered the call for hygiene products such as shampoo, conditioner, body lotions, toothbrushes and more for patients at Southlake and collected several boxes of items from their patrons. Most recently, they collected numerous items ? blankets, sleeping bags, clothes and medical supplies ? for the conflict in Ukraine with hundreds of bags and boxes gathered at their restaurant which were shipped out.?

Topper's Pizza, owned by Deepak Raj Rana and Sheetal, were recognized for their support of Marquee Theatrical Productions, grocery store employees, Welcoming Arms and more.

Despite the pandemic, they continue to show their commitment to the community, local businesses as well as local heroes.?

INCLUSIVITY AWARD ? AURORA BLACK COMMUNITY

The Inclusivity Award is presented to those who have contributed to making Aurora a more ?accessible and inclusive? place to live for all people ? and few organizations have stepped up to do just that over the past year than the 2022 recipient, the Aurora Black Community (ABC).

The mission of the ABC is to ?create an empowering environment that provides a connection bridge for multiculturalism in Aurora through music, food, events, and educational resources.?

?They have been very active with hosting many wonderful events in the Town of Aurora which bring residents together. In celebration of Black History Month, they hosted an interactive and creative Black History Month Paint & Write Night, a Diversity on Ice event to promote more diversity in sports, and an extensive virtual program celebrating Black History February and Forever.

?The ABC is a great example of what can be done when people work together towards embracing differences through learning, acceptance and respectfulness, harmony and love. Together they have demonstrated that anything can be accomplished through positivity, partnership, understanding, [and] respect which ultimately creates a sense of belonging, family, friendship, and inclusivity.?

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter