

Indigenous business owner fears closure if reopening doesn't happen soon

Georgette Dunn not only earned a degree at the University of Nottingham, she also found love with a man named Rick.

After they married, she convinced him to emigrate home with her and they settled in Aurora 10 years ago. Along with his bags, he brought along a fine history of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA). In Nottingham, Rick was an active professional. So, it only made sense for the two to open up their own club in 2015 ? Fearless MMA.

Dunn became one of the few female Indigenous business owners in Aurora and, to this day, holds that distinction high.

Over the course of this six-year period, Fearless MMA moved between two locations. Dunn has earned her NCCP Coaching Licence 1 and become a professional hand-wrapper. Without an official title for it, she is qualified to wrap the hands of pro fighters. She also teaches female boxing and fitness classes, while Rick teaches MMA to both amateurs and professionals.

Together, they've built a wonderful community for fighters. They've built robust relationships, strengthened the will of others. They've also strengthened the mindset more, the very fibres of the human conscience. They've also taught others how to endure pain through Muay Thai, Brazilian Jiu Jitsu and boxing.

Now, it's time to use everything she and Rick have taught others and fight through the threats of COVID-19.

Her now 6,000 square-foot facility is feeling the heat. There is a feeling of trepidation. Dunn says she is simply hanging on to what her and husband fought so hard for by a thread.

?We hope to be in the community for another six years, but it's not looking very good,? Dunn said.

When in the Red zone, fighters did come in to train. Dunn said that was better than nothing, but not nearly good enough. 70 per cent of the business was lost.

A provision was introduced by Boxing Ontario and Boxing Canada that if you had any pro fighters coming to the gym, your facility can remain open. Fearless MMA has seen athletes qualify for pre-Olympics, national and provincial competitions.

Richmond Hill native Jahangeer Faquiry qualified for pre-Olympic trials. Aurora native Sabir Yousufzai won Golden Gloves, the Brampton Cup and multiple provincial titles. Stouffville native Carter McGhie won the national Muay Thai championship last year and all the way from Georgia in Europe, Emzar Lashvili, known as ?The Ninja' by Rick, emigrated just a year ago to Canada and is a fantastic athlete.

Just recently, Aurora native Todd Stoute, also known by his fight name The Black Hulk, is a pro fighter who has recently come to the club to train.

?We have 80 registered members with the sanctioning government. We were able to continue to train them. When the government went into the Grey zone and it happened in Toronto first, Boxing Ontario originally said the government was leaving it up to the sanctioning body to interpret the legislation and act accordingly,? Dunn explained.

Boxing clubs in Toronto were only open for a mere three to four days before Public Health seemed to of denounced the Provincial government's proposed legislation.

?Boxing Ontario released a statement that Public Health/Health Canada, had released an addendum to the statement and said, to be clear, all indoor facilities were to be closed,? Dunn said.

Clubs were not to be opened at all moving forward, despite any pro fighters. Dunn says its going to be a challenge to bring all of these athletes back up to speed once everything does open up.

Much like myriad other businesses seemingly resorting to virtual classes, Dunn says this is not an option. MMA is tactile. Everything is done within six-feet apart from one another.

The bills continue to add up. Every now and then, Rick and Georgette will enter the building to ensure everything is functioning properly. The Canada Emergency Rent Subsidy (CERS) is running a month behind. Although it covers 65 to 90 per cent of monthly rent, Dunn fears when she must go back on her own, the debt incurred will be quite the load to carry.

?I guess everybody is in the same boat, but I guess everybody doesn't have the same amount of overhead, because we are such a large facility.?

Boxing Ontario President Jennifer Huggins sent letters to petition this closure to the Assistant Deputy Minister of Sport, Recreation and Community Programs Division, Steve Harlow, the Minister of Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture Industries, the Hon. Lisa MacLeod and Premier Doug Ford.

A meeting was held and the results of this meeting are pending. Dunn believes this might go very far.

In her facility, students who lack stable households came to the facility not only to train but to look for their coaches to be a figure and a role model in their lives.

Dunn says many students discuss their struggles and to seek advice and mentorship. It is a grave concern to her and her husband, while also acknowledging the severity of the virus.

As of now, Dunn is putting together a marketing contingency strategy to promote discounted prices once she is able to open her doors.

She says she has a firm foothold in the Aurora community, having held fundraisers for women's shelter and food banks. She has also held fundraisers for Indigenous causes. As a proud Indigenous woman, recognized as Metis, she will continue to support groups, spread her culture and will continue the fight for all Indigenous communities to achieve equality.

It is very important to her to keep the culture relevant, and notify people that she is a business owner. She wants to erase misconceptions and stereotypes. She wants to eradicate the borders that are created within our society and let citizens know, there are plenty of Indigenous entrepreneurs around.

And to all 200 members, Dunn says Fearless MMA is a place where the people in the community and elsewhere, can come and feel right at home.

Anyone is welcome to Fearless MMA. Even if you don't want to fight. Even if you want some rigorous cardio and teachings of self-defence, it's a great place for that too.

Dunn says she is unsure when the facility will be available to be open. She hopes it will be soon, as her and Rick continue the fight of their own. With all MMA teachings, they hope to be back at full strength once again.

By Robert Belardi