

Three day celebration marks opening of new Salvation Army



By Brock Weir

This weekend will mark a homecoming for the Salvation Army of Central York Region as they officially throw open their doors to their new multimillion dollar Northridge Community Church and community.

Completed through a million dollar capital campaign which saw contributions come in from businesses and organizations from the communities in which the Salvation Army of Central York Region serves ? Aurora, King, Newmarket, East Gwillimbury and Whitchurch-Stouffville, it marks the return of one of Aurora's earliest landowners, but they're very much focused on serving the future needs of a growing community.

?It has been an amazing transition,? says Major Brian Bishop of Northridge's move from its long-time home nestled in behind Newmarket High School, to its prominent woodland facility on Leslie Street, just north of Wellington Street East. ?Trying to move a church and an operation is a little bit more taxing than a home, but it has gone well.?

While they have been in their new digs unofficially since July 31, they marked their first Sunday service in their gymnasium last Sunday and the public is invited to come and see the building itself ? and some of the services they offer ? beginning this Friday evening.

The fun gets underway with a Youth Night with performances from the Juno-nominated band The Elwins. Designed to appeal to people of all faiths ? or even no faith ? the night will contain something for everyone from graffiti art and break dancing, to a basketball clinic in their high school-sized gymnasium, to a chance to show off on a mechanical bull in their large atrium.



Fun gives way to formality on Saturday with an official ribbon cutting at 1 p.m. featuring remarks from local dignitaries from all levels of government and an opportunity to thank all those who contributed to the success of the capital campaign.

?It will be a neat time to consecrate and dedicate these grounds to the community and to our God to allow this to move forward,? says Major Bishop. ?Following the ribbon cutting ceremony, we will have refreshments and tours of the facilities, as well as

children's activities, including an inflatable obstacle course which will take up the majority of the gym!?

Activities continue well into the evening including a community coffee house at 7 p.m., featuring live music and a talk from NHL Hall of Famer Mike Gartner, and chalk art, all in a relaxed atmosphere.

Sunday services will include readings from artist and dramatist Jason Hildebrand.

Set within nature, the new headquarters for the local Salvation Army is designed to provide a 'sense of community' for its many members and clients throughout the community who come to Northridge for their recovery and support ministries, mental health programs, children's programs, and community food bank, all of which will see expanded capacity in the new facility which is more than double the size of their former Newmarket home.

'Being on an arterial road, we see that as a tremendous benefit just for the drive-by traffic,' says Mr. Bishop. 'Being close to the 404 I think will really be beneficial for us as we serve our communities. Only time will tell [of the success] as ethnicity changes, as cultural changes, we know needs will change. It will give us the opportunity to be able to be creative and try and address the needs that are before us.'

But, what has the reception been right here and now? So far so good, says Major Bishop.

'The clients are really appreciating the open space as they come in, even in the atrium space where coffee is available for them when they come in. It is not dark and I think that in itself has been uplifting for them,' he says, noting coffee is available from Tim Hortons in special recognition of the more than \$100,000 they contributed to their capital campaign through their Smile Cookie program. 'Just to be able to experience that sense of excitement as people were in that community space in the Atrium enjoying coffee together was just a beautiful moment. That was a sense of seeing the vision become a reality where we have that kind of community connection. That was a moment for me, seeing that vision becoming a reality.'

This weekend, however, is not the end of that vision; this is merely phase one.

Over the next few years, the Salvation Army hopes to expand within the site with further outdoor amenities and, most importantly, a formal worship space which would feature a capacity of 500 - 600 people in theatre-style seating, which would also be available for community uses.

'We do what we do because of our faith,' says Major Bishop. 'When we follow the great commandment of a loving god, we also have to love others, but we don't make it a pre-requisite of our service to people in the community based upon their faith and where they are in terms of their journey. We are holistic in our approach in which we serve people body, mind and soul.'