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Leading Women & Girls recognized as community builders



By Brock Weir

Whether they are on the frontlines of change or working behind the scenes to be the change they want to see in the world, the work and dedication of countless women in our community inspires individuals every day.

On International Women's Day last Wednesday, representatives from across Aurora and Newmarket gathered to honour 23 of these community builders at the third annual Leading Women Leading Girls Building Communities Awards.

Hosted by Newmarket-Aurora MPP Chris Ballard at Newmarket's historic Old Town Hall, the women and girls honoured on March 8 represented a cross-section of both communities, in all sectors, and of all ages.

?The Leading Women Leading Girls Building Communities Awards acknowledges and celebrates women and girls who demonstrate exceptional leadership in working to improve the lives of others in their communities,? said Mr. Ballard. ?They are champions promoting issues such as equality and healthy, equal relationships. They raise awareness in the prevention of violence against women and girls, and help in reducing racism and discrimination.

?These women and girls encourage others to participate in public service and act as positive role models through mentoring, coaching and volunteering.?

The first such individual to be honoured was Rola Issa.

A driving force behind the re-establishment of the Aurora LEOs Club ? the youth branch of the Lions Club ? Ms. Issa was recognized for giving back at both levels of the club.

?Her relentless efforts can be witnessed through her volunteer work with the Newmarket Lions campaign to collect winter coats in need,? read her citation. ?Rola is an inspiration to the young LEOs that she works with.?

Social worker Angel Freedman's work as a community builder was saluted through her efforts to spearhead York Region's Fill A Purse campaign, which collects items for homeless women on the streets as well as Angel's Garage.

?Last year's Fill-A-Purse campaign saw more than 2,700 purses donated to women that were filled with essentials for their everyday use,? said her citation. ?Her endless volunteerism is inspiring to others and makes a positive impact on the community.?

Phyllis Morris, who from 2006 ? 2010 served as Aurora's second elected female mayor, following Evelyn Buck, was recognized for her work in the public sphere.

?Phyllis has been a leading woman within the Town of Aurora for many years,? announced emcee Vivian Risi. ?Phyllis is a leading woman to be looked up to. She is an example to all women and young girls. Phyllis has continued to inspire young women in the community, teaching them not to give up and maintaining a positive attitude. Through her volunteer work, Phyllis continues to be a strong voice and advocate for Aurora and Newmarket.?

Next up was Suzanne Whitehurst, who was recognized for her volunteerism with CHATS (Community and Home Assistance to Seniors), which progressed into a staff position at the Aurora-based organization.

?Suzanne has offered Meals on Wheels to seniors, participated in a reading program for seniors, the Homework Club of the York Region Children's Aid Society, the Aurora Food Pantry and the Aurora United Church Rise & Shine Community Breakfast. Her generosity and giving spirit is endless. Suzanne continues to inspire all who meet her.?

Another familiar community volunteer is Juli Playter, who was heralded as ?tireless? in her efforts to improve the lives of others.

?She has supported many causes, including the Heart and Stroke Foundation, Cancer Society, Newmarket Museum Board and the Terry Fox Run. Juliana has also played an important role in Take Back the Night, an international movement to raise awareness about violence against women. She leads many initiatives to support families with young children and is often a mentor to these young girls, inspiring them through her leadership.?

A familiar face in Aurora's sports community, Sport Aurora's Laurie Mueller was recognize for her nearly two decades of dedicated work in improving the athletic scene.

?Her passion in the development of opportunities for women and girls in sports is truly inspiring. Laurie has spent most of her volunteer life building programs and services that raise the profile and visibility of women in sport, but also in helping organizations engage women and girls in the program.?

Fighting for the rights of women, Elaine Adam's work was recognized, along with her ?compassion, empathy, and boundless energy? in her work with Community Living Aurora-Newmarket, Community Bread, and beyond.

?She is an advocate and big sister to everyone she meets. Elaine is constantly giving back to her community and is an advocate for women's rights. She is an inspiration and role model to both women and girls.?

Whether you have tasted her jams and preserves or worked with her on a committee, the ?fierce passion? of Jan Freedman for what she does is evident. Hailed as an ?inspiration to women everywhere,? she was recognized for her work with a number of community organizations including the Aurora Seniors' Centre.

?Jan strongly believes that no one, especially seniors, should be without a traditional meal over the holidays,? reads her citation, focusing on the Centre's annual Christmas dinner, which she has chaired for the past three years, as well as her previous recognition from the Town of Aurora for her work at the Aurora Farmers' Market and local festivals. ?Jan continues to work and inspire women and girls throughout the community.?

The arts were well-represented through Alex Karolyi, who received an ovation for her volunteer work with Markham Youth Theatre, Thatz Showbiz, and Creative Through Arts.

?Alex is a role model for many women and girls in the community with her entrepreneurial spirit and successful arts organization. She has mentored emerging artists and entrepreneurs and supported female-driven arts organizations. Alex inspires women and girls in the arts to reach for the stars and follow their dreams.

Leaders of tomorrow can also thank Laura Bradford, who was honoured for her work with Rotary International.

?Laura is a very dedicated to the betterment of young ladies and is always looking for girls to get involved. Laura has been an integral part in guiding high school girls in a club called Interact. This club was created by Rotary International as a way to help young people learn about volunteering, fundraising and how to become effective leaders. Laura's hard work and dedication to the program, and the young people involved, help it remain successful.?

NEXT WEEK: Shaylyn Benaissa, Nadia Gaurino, Lisa Walters, Catherine Capek, Maimoona Ashraf, Gloria Reszler, Tain Monzavi, Robyn Kassam, Rebecca Boyd, Karian Guimond, Marsha Fox, Taylor Piotrowski, and Edna Bozhori.