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# Cultural Centre's founding Executive Director moves on after eight years



**By Brock Weir**

When Laura Schembri walked through the doors of the Church Street School, finding bare walls and barely a stick of furniture, but she walked through the doors with one clear instruction from Aurora: ?Make us a cultural centre.?
For the past eight years, Ms. Schembri has built the Aurora Cultural Centre from the ground up and, with the guidance of an active Board of Directors, shaped what the Cultural Centre is today, but now it is time to move on.
Ms. Schembri is headed north to Newmarket, set to take up the role Supervisor of Cultural Services just after Easter on April 18. It is not a decision she says she made lightly, but an exciting opportunity.
?I have been watching Newmarket and it is pretty cutting edge,? she says. ?A lot of resources have been directed towards cultural services over many years and now a position has become available. Newmarket is my hometown and it can be 10 years before another job like this were to become available, but the fact that it became available now, and I feel the Centre is in such a good spot, I felt I had to seriously consider it when the offer was made.
?I am moving on with a sense of pride in what has been accomplished, a sense of excitement of what lies ahead for me, and in the belief that our staff team will carry on just as they always do.?
Ms. Schembri says she had that same sense of excitement when she first began tackling her mandate as Executive Director of what was to become the Aurora Cultural Centre. Describing it as ?the greatest opportunity in her career,? she remembers the ?beautiful but empty shell? she found and ?skipping around the empty halls? just thinking about the future.
?It is a very rare opportunity help birth a cultural organization of this scope,? she say. ?There are just not very many opening, and maybe some are having troubles.?
Birthing this particular culture centre, however, was not without its fair share of labour pains.
In its early days, the Aurora Cultural Centre was something of a political football, courting countless hours of debate at Town Hall over its very formation, funding and governance.
?I was completely unaware of any of the politics around it having lived outside of the Town and I came in all shiny and new, but given three documents,? says Ms. Schembri, noting the lease agreement between the Town and what was then known as the Church Street School Cultural Centre, the building's occupancy agreement and its strategic plan, otherwise known as the Novita Report. ?I knew that October there was going to be the first opening, so everything pointed towards making that happen. There was such an appetite from the community. They had been waiting for so much of the time and watching the building evolve over time that we just sort of galloped out of the gate.
?Following the Novita report, my job was to make a participatory community cultural centre. That was the number one edict in the report and that hasn't changed. With the new agreements [in place today] and the new negotiations, everything is still a participatory community cultural centre with diverse cultural experiences. I see my job as connecting community and culture in a collaborative fashion.?
Although she admits she was ?taken a little by surprise? by the politics surrounding the establishment of the Cultural Centre, she

came to believe the Centre was on the right track facing Councillors later on in a presentation to Council and seeing nothing but smiling faces at the other side of the table.

?When artists start supporting other artists, that is a signal that you are supporting a wider community than just the artists that are having the opportunity to exhibit their work,? she says. ?We began seeing that quite early on as we began to sell out concerts, and getting feedback has actually been the best part of my job.I want to thank the community for their amazing support of the Aurora Cultural Centre, for coming out and trying new things.

?We had over 30,000 visits last year. They are volunteering with us, giving of their time, expressing support, telling their friends, and staying with us through some of the difficult times. That level of support is appreciated by everyone and appreciated by me personally and all of us who work in support of the Cultural Centre. I would also like to thank our Board of Directors. I don't know that people realise what amazing skillsets in our community come together to guide the Cultural Centre with oversight and advice on a purely volunteer level. And I am grateful to the Town for their bravery and the struggles they have gone through to come to terms with something that is very different, and for the financial support. The Centre could not run without it and it is very substantial. Entrusting this beautiful building to me and us is something we take really seriously.

?I am leaving the Centre in excellent hands and these folks work so hard. I think everyone who comes here will know that because everyone is at every event and the events are going on seven days a week. It is the most impactful decision I have had in my career and I have had a very diverse career, but this tops it.?