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Shine a light on outstanding community volunteers



By Brock Weir

Volunteers are the unsung heroes in every community, but now is the time to sing their praises as the Town of Aurora accepts nominations for the 2017 Community Recognition Awards.
Whether they are your neighbour, your co-worker, your student, or even someone you might know only by reputation, the Town wants to hear from you.
Over the past year, a dedicated group of Aurora citizens have been hard at work organizing the 2017 Community Recognition Awards, which will culminate in a special awards ceremony saluting the ?stars? of Aurora on Monday, May 29, at Town Hall.
Encompassing volunteer service awards recognizing 20, 25, 30, 35, and 40 years of service, the Youth Volunteer Achievement Award, the Green Award, Good Neighbour Award, Good Business Award, and award for contributions in the fields of Arts & Culture, Inclusivity, and Community Safety, potential nominees could be your friends,
co-workers, neighbours, or students.
?For however many years we have all lived here, this Town has always been a Town of giving back, caring and volunteering,? says former mayor Tim Jones, now an ambassador for Neighbourhood Network, and an active member of the committee spearheading this year's awards. ?Volunteers actually run this town, be it hockey, be it soccer; you go back years and years and it has always been volunteer driven, and that is why everything has been so good in this Town.?
?Volunteers are everything to this Town,? agrees fellow committee member Jo-ann Spitzer, herself a past recipient of the Citizen of the Year award. ?We just have unbelievable support. We could always do with more, we have unbelievable support from individuals around the Town who want to help out and give back and I think it is marvellous.?
The purpose of the Community Recognition is to bring these people into the forefront and, if there is a residual benefit in shining a light on these accomplished individuals, that doesn't hurt either.
?We like to think it is our purpose to be able to encourage the volunteer to come out,
thank them so they know they are appreciated for what they do, but also for them to be
a role model and set the example for others,? says Mr. Jones. ?We try to do it to inspire
others to take a close look at what volunteering is about, to taste it, feel it, and maybe say, ?I'll try it. Usually, if you try it, it is pretty good. There is a lot of self-satisfaction
in volunteering and I think that is why people do it.?

WHAT'S NEW FOR 2017?

If you are familiar with the Community Recognition Awards, organizers have a few tricks up their sleeves to make this year's nomination process and awards ceremony fresh and exciting.
?We have tried to make it a little bit more inclusive,? says 2013 Citizen of the Year Brian North.

New this year is a twist on the customary Accessibility Award. Now known as the ?Inclusivity Award,? it is designed to still celebrate those helping to break down barriers in the community but well beyond disability.

?What we wanted to do was broaden the scope of the award so it wasn't strictly about accessibility,? says Stephanie Mackenzie-Smith, Manager of Corporate Communications for the Town of Aurora. ?While it certainly still can be, we want to be able to recognize individuals, groups and businesses that have contributed to making Aurora a more inclusive community and recognizing that we want people to understand that this is a great place to live, work and play for all people regardless of race, nationality, ethnic origin, colour, religion, sexual orientation, marital status, family status or disability.
?I think it is a very important thing that as the Town evolves we are making sure we are recognizing and celebrating those that are playing that role in our community and celebrating diversity and inclusivity.?
Also new for 2017, recipients will be celebrated to the wider world ? in real time ? through ongoing social media engagement throughout the night.
?There is a bit of a theme [this year] of celebrating the stars in our community,? says Ms. Mackenzie-Smith. ?The physical awards go along with that theme and we want to make sure
the evening has that touch that the guests feels special and knows how much they are appreciated ? and it is really about them. We are lucky to bring in other sponsors from our community that want to provide food and assist with the evening in different capacities to show that they have an appreciation for the role of volunteers in our community as well. They have a great, important role in also making the volunteers feel special and appreciated.?

CITIZEN OF THE YEAR

Many of the individuals with a direct hand in organizing this year's awards program know that special feeling all too well, having served as Aurora's Citizen of the Year. In addition to Councillors Sandra Humfryes and Tom Mrakas, and Mr. Jones, they committee is rounded out by recipients Diane Buchanan and Steve Hinder, as well as Mr. North and Ms. Spitzer.
?I remember the uh-oh,? says Mr. North, recalling being brought to Council Chambers on some other pretext only to realise, as Mayor Geoff Dawe spoke, that he was actually the recipient of the Citizen of the Year award.
Traditionally, recipients of the Citizen of the Year award are kept in the dark about their recognition until it is announced by the Mayor. This is a tradition which endures.
?If you just take a look at some of the names that are on that Citizen of the Year plaque, it is a pretty impressive list of people who are on there who have really given back to the Town,? says Mr. Jones on the award designed to recognize wide-ranging community impact. ?Having done twelve of these [recognition ceremonies] myself it is neat to watch as the Mayor describes who it is and sees the realization on their faces.?
?The Town has grown so much and we are turning into this much bigger community and we have this amazing, diverse community now and we want to make sure that all of those people who are maybe new to the community or have just moved here know of all the amazing volunteer opportunities that are out there and ways they can become involved in the community,? adds Ms. Mackenzie-Smith.
?That is also a very important part of the evening, showcasing the people who are already volunteering but also helping other people in the community see the benefits of getting involved and how many amazing opportunities involved here. There is a real sense of community, joy and connection that can be found and becoming a part of the volunteer community here in Town.?

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