

GranAurora and astronaut Williams come together to 'Defy Limits'?



By Brock Weir

Thinking locally and acting globally is a philosophy that is held close to the hearts of GranAurora, but this philosophy is set to go beyond global next week with an assist from astronaut Dr. Dave Williams.

GranAurora, the local chapter of Grandmothers to Grandmothers, an offshoot of the Stephen Lewis Foundation which links Canadian grandmothers to their counterparts in Africa, who are often left to look after their grandchildren and others orphaned by the AIDS pandemic, will host Dr. Williams, former President & CEO of Southlake Regional Health Centre on Monday for their fourth annual Author Talk.

Dr. Williams will speak about his life and career as an astronaut and surgeon, as well his new book *Defying Limits: Lessons from the Edge of the Universe*, at the event, which will take place October 29 at the Aurora Cultural Centre starting at 6.45 p.m.

'This is our fourth year doing our author event and we're hoping this will be as big a success as we've had before,' says local Gran Linda LeGallais, who co-chairs this event alongside Nel Marshall.

Ms. LeGallais is a newer 'gran' on the block, but no less enthusiastic on the mission at hand, which raises money to help grandmothers in Africa not only raise the next generation of their families but also to start new business ventures and plant firm roots for a sustainable future.

'One of our challenges is sometimes we're approached by people who say, 'We have needs at home. Why Africa?'' she says.

'Having travelled to Africa, Central America and having seen true poverty the likes of which we don't understand, with the possible exception of our Native people, there is a lot of help in Canada. This is a wealthy country where there is support. The kinds of needs you see in these countries is so profound and I'm compelled to reach out. I can't imagine suddenly having the responsibility of these children with no resources, so I personally think this grandmother connection is just fabulous.'

Fellow Gran Sharon Willan has also witnessed this level of poverty in a range of countries, including Malawi in southeast Africa. From her perspective, grandmothers in Africa face a double challenge of raising their grandchildren but also tackling a stigma that still exists in some areas of the continent surrounding AIDS. In some cases, individuals won't take in orphans because they believe the disease will spread throughout the home.

'I can remember every night being in one small town for about a week and you would just hear the keening, the funerals that they were having constantly for these people and you would just see these children hungry - it is something we just don't see here,' says Ms. Willan, noting that Grandmothers to Grandmothers is a way to give back while seeing real results come about. 'We were at a gathering near the beginning of the year and we were all talking about the impact the Stephen Lewis Foundation has had on the Grandmothers campaign.'

'The grandmothers in Africa have started small businesses, farming co-ops and things like that that have helped their whole community and made the group more resilient. That resiliency is something that has almost been unheard of in other groups that have been doing funding for other groups. The Stephen Lewis Foundation's way of funding it, having it come from the grassroots so that the grandmothers in Africa can apply for the program and say, 'This is our idea, this is how much money we need,' and there is

someone there to look [at their pitch], see if it is a good business venture, help them through it, and funding is given. For many of these things, it has remained sustainable and helped right through. That, to me, is something that is really important. People don't like to give money all the time, but when you know it is sustainable and you can go to the next group and help them get started, then it makes a difference.?

Adds fellow Gran Lenore Pressley: ?When grandmothers come here to speak, they are really moving and so thankful.?

The women agree that that the core message of GranAurora ? and Grandmothers to Grandmothers ? is, in the words of Ms. Willan, ?Think locally and globally and try to do both as much as possible,? and it is a balm in a world today when, in the words of Ms. LeGallais, ?you see so much of this ?closing-in' on the borders down south.'?

Now, with the help of Dr. Williams, who has seen the globe from the vantage point of the stars, they will be able to double down on their mission in the year ahead.

For more information on An Evening with Astronaut Dr. Dave Williams on October 29, the Gran Aurora organization, how to become involved, or any of their upcoming events and craft sales, call 905-727-9235 or email granaurora4114@gmail.com.