

Builders, teachers and activists make history of their own with Heritage Awards

By Brock Weir

As a history teacher, Helen Roberts always had a penchant for showing students where Canada has been, before looking at where Canada is going.

But even she was left 'stunned' by the latest development in her own path, named one of 2014's recipients of the Lieutenant Governor of Ontario's Ontario Heritage Award for Lifetime Achievement.

'It is a total surprise,' Ms. Roberts told The Auroran after her accolade was announced on Friday.

As a long-time volunteer and past president of the Aurora Historical Society (AHS), she has worked closely with her predecessors and successors 'and now fellow recipients' like John McIntyre, Leslie Oliver and Jacqueline Stuart, and she said she is humbled to be in their company.

'To be recognized with that slate of people is pretty amazing,' she said.

Wanting to bring history to life in her East York classroom, she took her students on a tour of Todmorden Mills, a museum complex nestled at the side of the Don Valley Parkway. It turned out to be a turning point for Ms. Roberts, now an Aurora resident. From that first visit, she became an active volunteer at the site.

Her volunteerism eventually brought her to work at Toronto's Gibson House Museum, the Cincinnati Museum Center in Ohio, and then to Hillary House, eventually serving as president of the Aurora Historical Society.

Her work has taken her to both sides of the Canada-US Border where she says, by and large, our southern neighbours might have more of an edge in heritage appreciation in that they fund it better both publically, from the government, and privately through foundations.

Fundraising played a key part in her leadership of the AHS at a time when they embarked on a significant renovation of the Church Street School in what was to become the Aurora Cultural Centre. She cites this as 'the most rewarding and disappointing' experience in that so much of their own money was put into the renovations but the end result was not what they had anticipated.

'I am not negative about the Centre because I think they do a wonderful job over there, but I also feel really proud when I am there because we were the ones who hired the architect, the ones who chose the colours of the paint, and decided what was going to happen in each of the rooms. It is very rewarding to think of that.'

Ms. Roberts will be one of several heritage advocates and activists recognized for their work at Town Hall this week as part of Ontario Heritage Week.

Recipients of the Ontario Heritage Trust's Heritage Community Recognition Program for the past year include Jack Laurion, who will be honoured for his conversion of the Browning House on Wellington Street East into a law office; Dorothy Gummersall, familiar to many as 'Queen Victoria' at many community events, for her work with the Aurora Historical Society and the Ontario Genealogical Society; and Wayne Keilty for his work landscaping and naturalizing the grounds of Hillary House, as well as his work with the Aurora Sport Hall of Fame.

Honoured with the 2014 Heritage Advisory Committee Awards of Excellence include Gordon F. Allen for restoration work at the Frederick Webster House on Yonge Street; the Newmarket Main Street Holdings Corporation for their renovations of the former Thompson's Furniture Store as an infill project now home to Aw, Shucks! restaurant; Antonio Masongsong for the Addition to Heritage Structure category for properties on Temperance Street; and David Heard in the Outstanding Achievement Category for his work on multiple fronts, including his A Step In Time Spirit Walks, the Aurora Farmers' Market, Doors Open Aurora, and his

advocacy for the Aurora Pet Cemetery.

?The Town of Aurora is proud to honour and acknowledge the Ontario Heritage Trust Heritage Community Recognition Program and Aurora Heritage Advisory Committee Awards of Excellence winners,? said Mayor Geoffrey Dawe in a statement. ?The contributions of these dedicated individuals and groups have helped highlight and shape Aurora's cultural heritage and unique characteristics of our Town's architecture.?