

Updated: Barb Allan is Aurora's 2019 Citizen of the Year



By Brock Weir

Barb Allan is Aurora's 2019 Citizen of the Year.

Ms. Allan, who founded the ABLE Network (Access to Better Living & Employment) to help young people with intellectual disabilities gain practical life skills and employment opportunities, was recognized on Monday night at the Town's annual Community Recognition Awards.

At the ceremony, Ms. Allan was celebrated not only for her work in helping these young adults gain the skills and experiences they need to live independent, happy and healthy lives, but also for her wide-ranging volunteer work that has encompassed local meal programs for community members in need as well as helping new Canadians, particularly Syrian refugees, settle into their new homes.

“She is someone who is truly dedicated to the health and wellbeing of her community,” said Mayor Tom Mrakas before revealing just who the winner was with Ms. Allan in the audience listening intently with her family. “She is well-known for her positive attitude, desire to assist anyone in need, ability to think creatively, and passion for sharing her knowledge and skills. She is actively involved in the community, including serving in a leadership role with the Welcome Table, which provides food and fellowship to those in need.

“She was a key member on the Interfaith Refugee Resettlement committee that worked to bring a Syrian family in Aurora and then helped them integrate into society. She has held various volunteer support roles within Trinity Anglican Church, local schools, the Aurora Food Pantry, Southlake Regional Health Centre, Special Olympics and many more.”

But is The ABLE Network, which she co-founded in 2008

with Joan Hurst, that received the most attention.

There is a proverb that states necessity is the mother of invention and innovation and Barb's efforts certainly exemplify this, said Celine Tremblay, who works at The ABLE Network. Once [Barb and Joan] identified the need for such a service, they conducted extensive research before the ABLE Network first opened its doors and it has continued to grow since then.

The ABLE Network is a unique program that is filling a highly important need in Aurora and other areas of York Region. It is an organization that directly addresses the high unemployment rate of young people with intellectual disabilities with a practical and dynamic program creating sustainable employment. ABLE is made up of many community partners forming the network of its thriving community-based program. ABLE provides meaningful opportunities for adults to be engaged in their community. Barb's goal was to promote the concept of diversity and accessibility in the community, demonstrating that people with an intellectual disability are citizens who have contributions to make to society.

It is an issue very close to Ms. Allan's heart.

She was inspired by her daughter, Meredith, who lives with an intellectual disability. As she and her family navigated the system and looked for resources around the community, they found significant gaps that needed to be filled.

So, she set out to close those gaps.

We all want to be valued, busy and reach our full potential, Ms. Allan told The Auroran last year.

Before joining The ABLE Network's board, teacher Nancy Bennett first met Ms. Allan when Meredith was in her Grade One class. From those early days, Ms. Bennett says Barb was a strong advocate for inclusion for students with intellectual disabilities.

She was involved with collaborating with educators to assist in implementing an inclusive and supportive educational environment for our kids with special needs, said Ms. Bennett. When Barb started looking for programs for Meredith when she graduated from secondary school, there were no programs in the Aurora area which were community-based, work-centred and inclusive. Barb saw a real need and set out to fill this need by founding The ABLE Network.

During the past 10 years, Barb has worked tirelessly with many community partners including numerous local businesses, charitable organizations, leisure centres and community agencies to build an inclusive community, and, through her efforts, The ABLE Network has grown and is being widely acknowledged as the model for programs for young adults with intellectual disabilities.

Barb Allan is a role model for anyone who sees a need in a community and works passionately to develop a way to fill that need and the community is a much better place as a result.

As Ms. Allan's name was announced by Mayor Mrakas, she received a standing ovation from the packed Council Chambers and the biggest cheers arguably came from Meredith, who quickly wrapped her mother in a hug.

Following the ceremony, Ms. Allan paid tribute to those who have been integral to her journey.

All those things they were talking about that I have done, I have done them all with other people, she said. None of this happens on its own and I have been surrounded by lots of really great people who worked with me at the Welcome Table, with the Refugee Resettlers and starting The ABLE Network. Hopefully this recognition will bring a little bit more awareness to the community on ABLE. Aurora is just such a supportive community and this verifies what we're doing is making a difference in the community.

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There is a proverb that states necessity is the mother of invention and innovation and Barb's efforts certainly exemplify this, said Celine Tremblay, who works with Ms. Allan at The ABLE Network, which operates out of Trinity Anglican Church's rectory. Once Barb and her co-founder Joan Hurst identified the need for such a service, they conducted extensive research before the ABLE Network first opened its doors and it has continued to grow since then.

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