

Charities have something to sing about as Blues Fest expands



By Brock Weir

Plans are underway for the annual Aurora Winter Blues Festival and this year, local charities and services will have more than a few things to sing about.

This year's party will be bigger than ever, expanding into a three-day extravaganza. The Festival will take over Theatre Aurora beginning Friday, March 7 with performances from Daddy Long Legs, Bill Durst, and JW-Jones, and will continue through the next evening with Jerome Godboo, Paul Reddick, and Mark "Bird" Stafford.

Before the party officially starts, however, Blues Fest will host their first ever "Blues Bash" festival kickoff at the Aurora Cultural Centre on Thursday, March 6. Featuring a live performance from "The BluesBros", a takeoff on the Blues Brothers, the Blues Bash was conceived to shine a light on the Blues Fest's two partner organizations "Blue Door Shelters and CHATS (Community and Home Assistance to Seniors).

"We really want to get people out and have a good time and get on the dance floor, which is really the origins of the Blues Festival," said Jamie MacDonald, who founded the festival with his wife Helen Gushue. "It started at our house with a dance party, so this is a bit of a throwback for us.

"With the Blues Bash, we want to put a spotlight on the benefactors. With the single night, we only had 45 minutes at intermission where we could do so and it wasn't giving back as much as I wanted. [This will show] why we're here and the really pressing concerns of our community we're coming together to recognize and support."

The BluesFest first connected with Blue Door Shelters, the Newmarket-based group of shelters serving York Region's Homeless, two years ago. The connection about more than simply connecting the blues with the colour of their doors, but recognizing a growing problem.

"Once I met with them and understood what they were all about, I thought this was just a natural fit for us," says Mr. MacDonald. "They are doing such good work here not only for individual males and families, but it struck home to us that there are so many people who are losing their housing just with the economic times."

The same difficulties can also apply to seniors, and looking to CHATS was a natural progression. Through organizing the Youth Music Extravaganza as part of last year's Sesquicentennial Canada Day Weekend Festivities, Mr. MacDonald met up with Aurora 150 Committee member Tim Jones, who also works with CHATS. There was a "natural synergy."

"This is very exciting," says Christina Bisanz, Executive Director of CHATS. "It is also very unique because this is in a different time of year. A number of fundraising events do tend to happen in the summertime, so this is in the late winter or early spring. It is another time of year to be getting out the message of CHATS and what we do."

Seeing the partnership with the Blues Fest as beneficial all the way around, Ms. Bisanz says funds raised through this partnership will go towards a number of initiatives CHATS currently has on the go now that they're settling into their new digs on Edward Street, just east of Yonge Street.

These include new adult day programs, some programming enhancements to their new home, as well as the development of a therapeutic garden within their grounds so clients can get back to nature.

"At the same time, we also allocate subsidies to our clients who can't afford our fees," she says. "Our fees are pretty moderate for our services, but for some people even a moderate amount is unaffordable. We always try and make sure we don't turn any client away because they can't afford our fees."

Karen Mason of Blue Door Shelters not only welcomes the opportunity to promote the work they do, but also increase awareness of homelessness throughout York Region.

"There are so many misconceptions about homeless people and it is always a good opportunity for us to advocate for our clients and help them understand that there are homeless people in York Region," says Ms. Mason. "I think that is not often understood. We serve 30,000 nights of service every year and we turn away 6,000 people. There is a huge, huge need in the Region and it is important that people are aware of that."

As much as the Blues Bash goes to create awareness, however, a lot of fun can be had too, adds Mr. MacDonald.

"It is about the music, but it is about the causes as well," he says. "We really want everyone to have fun, but recognize the causes as well. We came across the BluesBros at the Orangeville Blues Festival this past summer. They will be great for our evening."

The Blues Bash will be their first collaboration with the Aurora Cultural Centre and throughout the lead up to this year's festival, Mr. MacDonald and Ms. Gushue aim to throw the spotlight on local culture and local artists. Since the 2013 Festival wrapped, they have spread the word at art shows throughout York Region.

"We came across a fellow based in Newmarket who is going to do some live painting. That will take place during the Blues Bash night and he will be painting while the actual band is playing," says Mr. MacDonald. "We will be auctioning off a couple of his paintings that night, including 'live' portraits of blues legends like B.B. King, Muddy Waters, and others."

"We're expanding our focus now so it is more than just the music perspective. We're starting to look at local artists and how we can get them involved and give them some recognition as well."

For more information on the Blues Bash, the subsequent Aurora Winter Blues Festival, including ticket information, as well as associated initiatives like the upcoming Battle of the Bands, visit www.aurorawinterbluesfestival.ca or call the Theatre Aurora Box Office at 905-727-3669.