

Chefs' creations and artistic inspiration help warm hearts and bodies this holiday season



By Brock Weir

The ladles of steaming soup filled the stomachs of the hundreds of patrons who filled the Aurora Cultural Centre earlier this month for the annual Empty Bowls event hosted by the Pine Tree Potters; and the results of each bowl filled will help hundreds of people across the York Region community stay warm --- body and soul ? this holiday season.

Now in its eighth year, the Pine Tree Potters Guild's Empty Bowls fundraiser, which sees local guild members creating hundreds of original and unique ceramic bowls ready to be filled with soups created by nearly a dozen area chefs and restaurants, all enjoyed by a sold-out crowd of patrons, raised \$21,000, which will be divided between Aurora's Welcoming Arms and Newmarket's Inn from the Cold, which provides services and resources to the homeless.

?This is incredible,? said Sarah El-Gereis, Executive Director of Welcoming Arms, which hosts three weekly meal programs in Aurora and various other services, social and financial, for community members in need. ?It is a beautiful event to see the community coming together and putting their efforts towards this cause. Empty Bowls is an international fundraiser too, so it is cool to see the whole world coming together to fight against poverty.?

This is a sentiment shared by Inn from the Cold's Ann Watson, who attended the event along with Ms. El-Gereis.

?Events like this help us reach another audience as well,? said Ms. Watson. ?Last year, we had people pick up a volunteer flier and then contact us because they wanted to be involved. I often feel like we're speaking to the same people over and over, raising concerns, talking about the homelessness crisis, and I think when we talk about these things we're often talking to people who know these issues. They are the ones who are paying attention, but an event like this that is organized by a third party brings in a whole new group of people to get them to know about the issues that are out there.

?It ticks a lot of boxes: it's a fundraiser, but it is also a really nice event. It's elegant, it's very classy, the food is delicious, people are enjoying themselves. The fact they get to do a bit of Christmas shopping too [at the Potters' annual Holiday sale] is an added bonus because they are learning something about why they are here. We don't touch these people regularly.?

Inn from the Cold will use their share of the pot this year to address, among other things, the high cost of providing food for people who come through their doors. When the organization first established its drop-in program two years ago, they averaged six to ten people per session. Now, these numbers average between 25 and 40.

Welcoming Arms is experiencing a similar growth ? and the similar challenges that this kind of growth brings to a non-profit organization.

?We'll be using [our share] towards our meal programs,? said Ms. El-Gereis, noting it costs about \$400 a week to create the meals served up by Welcome Table, Martha's Table, and the Rise and Shine Breakfast. ?We'll also be putting the money towards the grocery gift cards we give out and York Region Transit passes. It's very helpful. We're also grateful to be able to raise awareness here because I think the homelessness population is really under the radar in this community, but when people come to see there are these big fundraisers and there is a need here in the community, it is great. I agree that we reach a completely new target audience.?