

First decade of successes and promising future marked by Neighbourhood Network



By Brock Weir

Neighbourhood Network needed no introduction to the people filling the hall of Newmarket's Old Town Hall on Thursday night as the Aurora-based community organization celebrated its first decade connecting community.

Most of them were there at its inception when the fledgling brainchild of then-MP Belinda Stronach brought together a few handfuls of community organizations and even more handfuls of local volunteers to make a difference, and all looked on with pride as they saw how the 'mighty' idea turned out to be an equally 'mighty' force for good in northern York Region.

'Neighbourhood Network was born out of a little idea that individuals, if given relevant and easy opportunities to connect with their communities, could turn into powerful resources,' said Ms. Stronach in a statement read out by Magna for Community's Steve Hinder. 'I like to think of Neighbourhood Network as the original online matchmaker - only its success is not measured by marriages, but measured in good works.'

'From the early beginning of connecting volunteers with those in Newmarket-Aurora, Neighbourhood Network now connects over 12,000 volunteers in five municipalities in York Region with organizations and individuals who need support.'

Indeed, Neighbourhood Network still sticks close to its original mandate of connecting community groups with specific needs with potential volunteers within the community who might be able to lend a hand, but often don't know where these volunteer opportunities - or community needs - lie.

With its early foundations in Aurora and Newmarket, it now serves the communities of King, East Gwillimbury and Georgina.

Speaking of Neighbourhood Network's foundation, Mr. Hinder said these needs became relevant to Ms. Stronach during her time as MP when constituents would come in with needs that were often beyond the purview of the Federal government.

While some came in for assistance with their Passport applications, immigration matters, or dealings with the Canada Revenue Agency, Mr. Hinder said the majority of people who came in were simply looking for help in its most basic form.

'Belinda always liked to use the example of a single mom with three kids whose fridge had just died,' he recalled. 'She said, 'You can't tell me there are not 100 fridges in homes in our community looking for a good home.' The problem was neither one of them knew the other existed. It was our job to hook them up. It was on this pretext Neighbourhood Network was formed, knowing the literally hundreds of charities, non-profits looking for volunteers and the people in the neighbourhood willing to help. They just don't know where the needs are and it is our job to share that knowledge.'

One man working behind the scenes to lay the groundwork for that vital connection between organization and volunteer is incumbent Newmarket-Aurora MP Kyle Peterson who, back in 2007, was working as a lawyer for Magna International, which continues to fund Neighbourhood Network.

At the time, Mr. Peterson said the automotive sector wasn't 'going the way many would have liked' and the company was being

encouraged to invest in the needs of the community.

“Magna stepped up and invested,” said Mr. Peterson. “It was great to see that community support by all those people. At the time, we needed community support as well as corporate support and it was great we had Tom Taylor and Tim Jones, the former mayors from the towns where Neighbourhood Network first set its root to step up [as ambassadors]. We sat around the house on Yonge Street having brainstorming sessions trying to think, “What exactly is it we’re intending to do here?”

“It’s a testament to the community that we are so blessed and fortunate to call home that something like Neighbourhood Network can thrive. We’re lucky to live in a relatively affluent community but we can’t forget that not everybody shares that affluence. Not everybody is as fortunate and lucky as their neighbours.

“Neighbourhood Network is, in a way, an acknowledgement of that very fact and it is great that so many volunteers and so many corporate partners stepped up to help those in our community who aren’t as lucky or as fortunate or as blessed as others, and I think that will be the legacy of the first 10 years of Neighbourhood Network, and I hope it will continue to be the legacy of the next decade or century into the future.”

To ensure Neighbourhood Network continues to thrive into the next decade or 10, this two-way exchange will need to continue.

In his concluding remarks, Mr. Hinder said he encourages community groups, businesses and residents alike to reach out for Neighbourhood Network when they recognize a need in the community and “Are unsure what role you and others might play.”

“It is our job to know who is out there and what they are doing,” he said. “When the needs are identified, we love convening a meeting, getting everybody around the table, and nine times out of ten we find the community has the resources to address their own issues; they just didn’t know one another existed.

“It’s a powerful thing. We believe the community has the ability to solve its own problems and that is our job.”

For more on Neighbourhood Network, visit www.nnetwork.org.