

New executive director explores new opportunities for Cultural Centre



By Brock Weir

It's a far cry from being an accountant, but the number crunching has served Suzanne Haines well as she dropped the traditional nine-to-five job to embrace her love of the arts – and they are skills she continues to draw upon as she charts a new path for the Aurora Cultural Centre.

Ms. Haines, a native of Mono near Orangeville, took over as the Centre's second Executive Director this spring. A resident of Burlington, she comes to the Aurora Cultural Centre after previous stints as Executive Director of the Burlington Performing Arts Centre, and General Manager of the Gateway Theatre in Richmond, British Columbia.

Shortly after her appointment, she hailed the Centre as a ‘gem in a community that is growing and changing’ but now that she has had a couple of months to get her feet wet, she senses that the ‘gem’ is also a resource that is growing and changing.

‘There are so many ideas running around in my head,’ she says. ‘Working with my staff and trying to determine where there might be space to add is the first step and where we have an opportunity within the community to add as well. The facility itself is quite occupied and busy, which is great – a product of their success – and we need other people and partners to come on board if we're going to be able to grow the organization, add programming and add opportunities.’

When she first learned of the job opportunity at the Aurora Cultural Centre, Ms. Haines says she was ‘delighted’ by how much had transpired around the Centre since its inception.

There are ‘growing pains’ in any community following the opening of a cultural centre, she says, and Aurora is no exception.

‘It's nice to see that we're past that and the community has embraced it and the programs are very successful,’ says Ms. Haines. ‘I was looking for an organization that was still small and looking at growth opportunities and had a strong foundation. As I [did my research] and read the governance documents I thought, ‘Wow, this is an organization that has this all sorted out. That's great!’

Seeking growth opportunities has been a hallmark of Ms. Haines' career so far.

In the line of duty, one of the first questions she asks people she has never met before is, ‘What was the first memorable arts experience you ever had?’ Oftentimes, people who love arts and culture have an ‘early touch point’ with the arts from a very young age – and she is no exception.

‘Mine is going to see As You Like It in Stratford when I was eight,’ she says. ‘My parents took us as a family and I was just mesmerized. I asked to go to theatre camps just to get involved in the arts. I was very, very shy at that age but [through the arts] I found my voice.’

But, despite serving in a leadership capacity as a teen, sitting on the board of Theatre Orangeville as they restored the local opera house back to its original purpose, she set out to pursue a career in business.

‘I wanted to be an accountant!’ she says with a chuckle, noting she initially pursued this path with Xerox before the muse began beckoning with an opportunity to spearhead a concert program. She eventually followed this trail to the Gateway Theatre in her early 20s.

‘The opportunity that was presented to me [at Xerox] was really exceptional, so I think there were other people in my life who said,

'Why are you turning your back on this opportunity to be fully trained as a CA with all this money at you?'

'Well, what's important? It has always been to love my job, connect with the community and I didn't know I could do that in the financial services world. I didn't know how to connect that. I was more interested in that creative side of things. I am a numbers person and that has served me, helping organizations be sustainable. I carried what I needed with me.'

As she works with the Aurora Cultural Centre's Board of Directors, she looks forward to exploring every opportunity that presents itself both inside and outside its historic Church Street walls, and making use of every inch of the heritage building.

'This is your Cultural Centre, so come and enjoy it,' she says. 'You can see the same quality of art here that you can see elsewhere. There is lots of opportunity for growth and partnership. My door is open and the space is open for people to come and enjoy. Watch and see what happens. I don't need to turn the ship. I can stand upon the foundation of what has been created by boards and staff before me and continue to build.'