

Spotlight "smiles" on local business excellence



By Brock Weir

There were plenty of smiles to go around Thursday night when, after a five year absence, the Aurora Chamber of Commerce renewed its commitment to shining a spotlight on local business at the revived Business Excellence Awards.

And, if you probably asked, a few of the smiles in the room could be attributed to Dr. Ali Shojaei.

Dr. Shojaei's Aurora Orthodontics shared top honours with library book distributor WhitehotsInc taking home the Business Excellence Award.

The two diverse businesses vied for top honours alongside fellow nominees Aurora Family Martial Arts, Carruthers Financial & Associates, GEM Health Care Services and snapd Aurora.

As the name suggests, the Business Excellence award is intended to "recognize business excellence," but, for Dr. Shojaei, excellence runs deep.

"My goal is to provide the highest quality orthodontic care for my patients and I believe I can do this by hiring excellent staff, being able to stay on top of my continuing education and the advances in the technology of our business," he said, as he was joined on stage by his team. "Me and my team have a lot of plans to be able to give back in various ways and touch other people's lives, so I want to thank everybody who is up here because I am just one person and I couldn't do anything without them."

While Aurora Orthodontics is a comparatively new business to Aurora, Whitehots has a storied history to call its own.

CFO Sharon Culver billed the business as a "matchmaker" between libraries and publishers that moves over 30,000 books to libraries from coast to coast each year.

"It is our 30th anniversary, so this is a wonderful gift," Ms. Culver told the crowd. "We love being in Aurora."

For the business community, the return of the Business Excellence Awards, previously known as the Business Achievement Awards, was a "wonderful gift" in itself. Put on ice five years ago by the Aurora Chamber of Commerce, its revival was long overdue, according to Chamber Board President George Hughes.

"This celebration of excellence is very important to me because it is an opportunity to be recognized by peers," he explained to audiences gathered for the ceremony and dinner at King's Riding Golf Club. "When you're working for another company or working for 'the man,' if you do a good job you get some praise, but there is no other compliment for a small business, or any business, than getting recognition from your peers."

"It is a way of providing peer recognition which doesn't happen when you work those long hours as a small business entrepreneur, and that is what this awards ceremony is and how important it is to me."

This year, in all, 17 local businesses were nominated in five different categories.

The first award of the evening went to Artistica Ballroom Dance Studio which, along with Simply Yummy Bakery and Athletify,

vied for the New Business Venture trophy, which recognizes new businesses that have exhibited hard work, entrepreneurial initiative and success.

It is truly an honour just to be represented here and [be a] part of the community, said Patrick Derry, who owns and operates Artistica alongside Kelly Stacey and Anastasia Trutneva. We are so grateful to be a part of this community. It is kind of by chance in a way that we ended up here three and a half years ago when we sat in a basement apartment and mapped all of our clients on a map of the greater Aurora area and basically set up a 10 km radius with a string that centred right somewhere between Vata Court and Industrial Parkway South.

A couple of years later we opened our doors at Industrial Parkway South and we couldn't be more thrilled to be part of such a great community, and to be recognized here with so many amazing people we now call friends is just an absolute honour.

Emotions ran high in the next category when MR Menswear brought home the trophy in the Community Involvement category, recognizing businesses that show a strong commitment to giving back through participation in numerous businesses and community organizations and/or charitable events.

Nominated alongside Apple Self Storage and RE/MAX Hallmark Lind Group Realty Ltd. Brokerage, the award was accepted by Mike Rathke, the MR behind MR Menswear who has been battling a second courageous fight against cancer.

Thank you so very, very much, said Mr. Rathke, who has used his business as a means of raising tens of thousands of dollars for organizations ranging from Southlake to SickKids, to Easter Seals to the MS Society of Canada.

The Non-Profit of the Year Award was a race between Hope House Community Hospice (formerly Hospice King-Aurora-Richmond Hill), The Able Network, and, the eventual honouree, CHATS (Community and Home Assistance to Seniors).

Although we serve all of York Region and south Simcoe, providing care and services to over 8,100 clients, our home and our base is right here in Aurora, said CHATS CEO Christina Bisanz, joined on stage by CHATS' Tim Jones, who is planning to retire in February. As one of the largest not for profit employers, we're also very much a part of the community participating in the annual Aurora Street Festival, Santa Claus Parade, and anything we can do to really be a part of this community because it is our home and this is just wonderful particularly so because we only have a little bit more time that this wonderful gentleman is going to be part of our organization on a day to day basis.

Finally, the Trailblazer Award, which recognizes businesses that demonstrate innovation and creativity within their industry came down to Everyday Cooking by Sandra Katanic, and Food in Motion.

This comes as big surprise. It is amazing the doors that open when you can actually make a good lasagne, said Chef and Food in Motion co-owner John Cosentino. We had immediate support from the Chamber, the Town and we really see the dividends paid from choosing Aurora as our home and we look forward to continuing to work with everybody here.