

UPDATED: Mary Georgopoulos is Aurora's Citizen of the Year



By Brock Weir

As a restaurateur, Mary Georgopoulos served up more than just food for hungry Aurorans.

She let worthy community causes have the run of Jonathan's Restaurant, the popular former eatery founded by her parents, to shine a light on their work.

She also quietly opened the doors of the restaurant each Christmas Day to help give, in conjunction with Welcome Table, countless local families in need a proper holiday meal.

Now, Aurorans will have a whole year to say thanks to Ms. Georgopoulos as Aurora's 2016 Citizen of the Year.

Ms. Georgopoulos was recognized with the honour by Mayor Geoff Dawe on Monday night at the Town's annual Community Recognition Awards.

"This year's recipient exhibits heartfelt compassion, consistently offering a helping hand with no expectation of reward in return," said Mayor Dawe. "For the past 25 years, she has quietly supported our community by assisting in several local charities, church activities and special fundraisers to help local families and individuals in need. Her extraordinary passion for making our community a better place to live is supported by her charismatic presence, gentle hand, friendly smile and always a comforting hug."

Paying tribute to the new Citizen of the Year without naming names, the Mayor cited her work with local charities, volunteerism at community events, and the multiple organizations that have received some form of assistance from her, whether it is providing youth work placements or providing budding artists with a place to display their work.

Mayor Dawe's remarks were followed by a video tribute from nominator Stuart MacLaren, who paid tribute to her "sense of pride, great warm smile, and welcoming attitude."

When her name was finally announced, she was greeted with a lengthy standing ovation from numerous friends, colleagues, and by the time the video rolled, her children who snuck into the back of the ceremony with impeccable timing.

Giving the Mayor a trademark "comforting hug," Ms. Georgopoulos was filled with emotion as she thanked the crowd.

"It feels a little selfish to accept this award when it is always a collaboration," she said, adding her number one goal is to make her

children ? and her grandchild on the way --- proud of her. ?There will be so many more plates to break and so many more things to celebrate. I see now so many people in this room that have been by my side. I just want to thank everyone for all the love and I am just so grateful to live in such a wonderful town that just gives back so much. I am so very, very grateful.?

Following the ceremony, Ms. Georgopoulos said she was brought to Town Hall under the assumption Mr. MacLaren was receiving the honour, but the pieces fell into place when the video began to roll.

Reflecting on the award, she said she felt more like someone who is able to ?connect the dots, bringing people together? and those people are the ones that make things happen.

Those in the audience, however, had a different story to tell.

?Mary is an unsung hero,? said Magna's Steve Hinder, who also nominated Mary for the award. ?She shies away from the spotlight. People like Mary are reluctant heroes and by sharing their stories it helps to inspire others to get involved and become engaged in the community, which is what Aurora was built on. Today, it continues to be such a significant way in which to build community. As we continue to grow, it is probably even more important than it has been in the years gone by.?

From its early days, giving back to the community was a way Jonathan's immediately stood out from the crowd, beyond their traditional Greek and Canadian fare. Their first foray into fundraising came with ?It's All Greek to Me?, a fundraiser organized by Ms. Georgopoulos for the Heart & Stroke Foundation of Canada after her father became ill.

From there, they branched out into events to support organizations such as the AIDS Committee of York Region, Big Brothers Big Sisters of York, and Welcome Table.

?Part of my volunteering stems from my dad and all the many times he talked about the struggle when he first came from Greece and how great it would have been if someone had just given him a helping hand,? said Ms. Georgopoulos. ?That kind of stuck with me. ?With the restaurant, I was able to do a lot more because I got to know some of the charities and it just made so much sense. I have heard a lot of volunteers talk about how it makes the world a better place for all of us, and it does make a better place for people who are volunteering as well. You get so much in return.

Mr. Hinder first met Mary when Jonathan's was being run by her parents. As time went on, he said he saw Mary become more and more engaged both in the business and the community.

?The more engaged she got, the more the doors became open at Jonathan's to host any community cause she saw worthy,? said Mr. Hinder. ?The work has followed her to [Aw, Shucks! where she recently came following a year or so in semi-retirement] and she is really great at rallying people to get out and support something that has been brought to her attention in terms of a community need. Because she does it straight from the heart, she gets a lot of support from folks who know that it is only because she wants to help.

?She has such a compassionate spirit and she is a very genuine individual. It is totally what drives her, the need itself, and because she is compassionate, genuine, and people want to help Mary because they know if it is something she is getting involved in then there is a real need. She doesn't care who, when, how or why. Her door is wide open. She doesn't pick specific causes or needs. It is the need that attracts her.?

WINNERS:

Youth Volunteer Award ? Stephanie Palombi: Stephanie, a Grade 10 Student at St. Maximilian Kolbe Catholic High School was recognized for her volunteerism at the Aurora Seniors' Centre and her participation on the Tow's Youth Engagement Committee.

Environmental Award ? Irene Clement: A Board member of the Aurora Community Arboretum for over 11 years, she has chaired the organization since 2007. As chairperson, Irene has been instrumental in leading the ACA members in their efforts to support and

improve Aurora's 100-acre Arboretum.

Achievement in Sports Award ? David Giroux: David was recognized for his many years in the baseball community, including his 16-year tenure as president of the Aurora Minor Ball Association, as a founder of Sport Aurora, his leadership in the amalgamation of the Aurora-King Baseball Association, and his leadership in the design of the baseball diamond at Stewart Burnett Park.

Community Organizer of the Year ? Gwen Al-Kas: Gwen has been an active member of the Regency Acres Public School community for over 15 year, where she has worked to instill healthy eating options for all students, leading the Healthy Schools Committee, organizing and implementing free healthy lunch days and daily healthy snacks.

Good Neighbour Award ? Buster Flynn: Recognized as "the all-encompassing good neighbour," Buster was saluted for his work helping his neighbours clear out after snow events, and helping those with mobility challenges.

Not-For-Profit Organization Award ? The Rotary Club of Aurora: The venerable local service club was recognized for both its long-standing service as well as its partnership with numerous other service organizations, including the Aurora Sports Hall of Fame and the All Kids Can Play Program. Over the years, they have donated \$50,000 to the enhancement of Rotary Park, \$100,000 towards the construction of the Aurora public Library, and \$130,000 to Southlake Regional Health Centre.

Good Business Award ? Omar's Shoes: After 46 years in business, Omars was heralded for its years of community service and support of the Able Network, which teaches young adults with intellectual challenges to reach their full potential, and their long-standing association with the Optimist Club of Aurora, Aurora Minor Hockey, and Aurora Youth Soccer.

Accessibility Award ? Matthew Abas: Matthew, a Grade 12 student at St. Max was singled out for his dedication in breaking down barriers not just at his school, but the community as a whole, ranging from the improving accessibility and safety in school portables, securing ergonomic desks for fellow students sharing his height, and his advocacy for driver's-ed vehicles for taller students.

Arts & Cultural Award ? Christine Valentini: An artist, Ms. Valentini was honoured for her work preserving Aurora's architectural landmarks in paint. Participating actively in both cultural and artistic life within our community, Christine is a proud participant at many public and juried art exhibitions where she has won numerous awards. She helped to create and remains a volunteer and Director of the Aurora Artists Studio Tour.

Volunteer Service Awards

Tony Anderson, Jack Laurion, Vic Metcalfe, Darryl Moore, Ken Smith (20 Years); Bill Kizovski, Bill Otton, Greg Pettit, Don Stubbs (25 Years); Robert Cole (30 Years); Vic Priestly (35 Years).