

Winter Blues Fest spreads warmth throughout Aurora



By Brock Weir

As Aurorans began feeling like they have had their fill of winter, there was a bit of a reprieve as the Aurora Winter Blues Festival (AWBF) helped spread the warmth all over town.

The fourth annual AWBF kicked off Thursday at the Aurora Cultural Centre, before expanding for two further nights of sold-out, packed music at Theatre Aurora, the Aurora Public Library, Town Hall, and a number of local restaurants including King Richard's Pub and Grill and Jonathan's Restaurant.

Boasting such talents as the Paul Deslauriers Band, the Sean Pinchin Band, Conor Gains, Skakuraa S'Aida, Angel Forrest, and Angelique Francais, the Festival kicked off with the second annual Blues Bash featuring the Juno-nominated band, The 24th Street Wailers, which had the walls of the historic Church Street School building thumping.

The Blues Bash was a way not only to provide an appetizer of things to come, but also to salute the two local charities benefiting from this year's festival ? Blue Door Shelters and CHATS ? Community and Home Assistance to Seniors.

?I wandered through Leeder Place, our family shelter, tonight and there were little people three years old, eight years old, padding around in their pyjamas,? said Radha Bhardwaj of Blue Door Shelters. ?As much as it breaks your heart to know that child poverty is alive and well in our region, which is so wealthy and so privileged in so many ways, it is also wonderful to know that a place like Blue Door Shelters exists, and it exists because of all of you and the support you offer.?

Homelessness in York Region is often invisible, but that doesn't mean it is non-existent, she added. People in York Region often couch surf for weeks and months at a time, crash with other family members or friends in their basements, occasionally in ?precarious? living conditions, or even in abandoned barns in York Region's more rural communities.

?It is [often] just an unfortunate roll of the dice and people find themselves unemployed, or people may find their family has broken down and people need somewhere to stay,? Ms. Bhardwaj added. ?Someone might bring a family member over because they have a mental health illness and they can't take care of them anymore. We have had people come to our shelter from various parts of the community and it knows no boundaries.?

The ideal of trying to age in dignity also knows no boundaries, but financial contributions from this year's AWBF will help many

seniors do just that through CHATS. The organization, which has been located in Aurora for over 30 years, has since grown to serve over 7,000 seniors throughout York Region and South Simcoe, allowing them to continue living in their homes safely and independently as long as possible.

“Our objective is to try and keep these people out of hospital, emergency rooms and out of long-term care, and being able to live in dignity and independence as long as possible as a result of the programs and services we provide,” said CHATS CEO Christina Bisanz, noting that funds raised through events like these go directly into making these programs possible and accessible to clients.

“Some of our programs do involve a moderate fee, but believe it or not, there are a number of seniors in our community who are very low income and even a moderate fee is beyond their means. The generosity of your funds supports us and helps us provide exceptional subsidies so we can ensure that no senior gets left behind, no senior gets turned away from the services CHATS can provide to help them live in their community with dignity, safety and independence.”

Helping kick-start the fundraiser was Wanderlust, an all-girl teen quintet.

The teens formed their band out of The Arts Music Store, which has store locations ? and teaching spaces ? in both Aurora and Newmarket. An additional component of the AWBF's mandate is to highlight these up and coming musicians, in conjunction with The Arts, and lay a foundation for continuing musical education and opportunities within the community.

“Music is an integral part of growing up,” said Patty Keele of The Arts, citing opportunities students had to play during and in the lead-up to the festival at restaurants and “pop up” performances at the Library. “To experience the passion, the struggles, challenges and rewards that come from music, I can't say enough things about it. We are so fortunate to get our youth out of private classrooms and get them into venues where they get to experience what it feels like to play live music.”