

## 50 years of volunteers and activism celebrated by AHS



**By Brock Weir**

Members and directors of the Aurora Historical Society (AHS) came together Thursday to celebrate their achievements as the AHS officially marked its 50th anniversary.

It has been a landmark year for the AHS not only as they celebrate their milestone, but look ahead to the future.

Speaking at the Aurora Cultural Centre's packed Brevik Hall, adjacent from the Aurora Room, due to become permanent museum space for the AHS in the New Year, AHS president Suzanne Reiner hinted at the changes to come.

"Right now we are in the midst of transferring the Aurora Collection to the Town of Aurora," she said. "We're also involved with the Hillary McIntyre Park Founding Committee in trying to establish a heritage park. We're also involved with the Aurora Sports Hall of Fame, the Aurora Cultural Roundtable and we're also involved with smaller community groups."

Perhaps what generated the most buzz in the room was an update on their previously announced intentions to take the show on the road. The AHS now has an educational programmer to give students an up close and personal encounter with their heritage.

"This is an initiative we started this year and we're going to be going into schools to teach a heritage curriculum so instead of getting kids to come to Hillary House, we're going to take the collection to schools. It is very exciting."

Ms. Reiner also said they are looking at new and creative ways to bring not only the collections to life but take Hillary House itself outside the box. These plans include continuing with a new program started earlier this year bringing yoga to the lawns of Aurora's only National Historic Site. Beginning next month, regular meditation and healing circles will also be part of the roster, while this week the house got spit-polished for its close-up on an upcoming episode of Storage Wars Canada.

No, the crafty people on the hunt for bargains on lapsed lease storage units did not find a loophole to get their claws into the Aurora Collection, but they did find antique medical equipment in one of their buys and what better place to learn more about their haul than at the Koffler Museum of Medicine housed at Hillary House?

"We are always looking at new ways to use Hillary house in innovative and different ways and find out our niche market," said Ms. Reiner.

But as Ms. Reiner looked ahead to the future, it was an evening to celebrate where they have been. In a statement read out by local historian and former councillor Bob McRoberts, MPP Frank Klees said Aurora has been "enriched" by the dedication of past and

present AHS members.

“This celebration is in recognition and appreciation of those contributions that, in turn, have ensured that Aurora's rich history is documented and preserved for generations to come.”

Councillor John Abel represented the Town during the festivities. He said the work of the AHS, including their current exhibition Aurora Collects celebrating Aurora's 150th anniversary, has helped to shine a light on the “people, events, and landscapes” that have shaped Aurora.

“Since 1963, the society has been run by a group of dedicated volunteers and staff who ensure that Aurora's stories are heard and our history is celebrated,” he said.

The tributes were appreciated by the many AHS volunteers in attendance, but for Dr. Leslie Oliver, founder of the AHS, they hit particularly close to home. The Society, he said, for reasons he didn't quite understand, has become a life's work for him “and will continue to be so.

“Looking back, I wonder why as a young engineer of 33, why I ever got involved with a historical society,” he said. “This was scarcely a thing engineers were supposed to be all about. Besides, historical societies in the 1960s were scarcely mainstream ideas. It was a bit off the wall.”

As The Auroran reported last week, Dr. Oliver was “tricked” into starting the Historical Society by Ernest H. Clarke, a long-standing mentor to the young Dr. Oliver.

“As a community our sense of historic identity and cultural heritage have become major factors in community planning and development well beyond what many of us would have ever imagined,” he said. “We have come to realise Cultural Identity has become a principal driving force the world over. We are in an epic period in which the great events that shape our lives are, more than anything else, are triggered by cultural difference and the struggle for cultural identity and recognition.

“We will continue to seek new roles and new identities for ourselves, responding to changing conditions and needs in the community as we have done for the past 50 years, understanding as we go the changing cultural needs of the community of our times.”