

Athletes and artists team up for the fifth annual ?Special O?



By Brock Weir

Look up into the sky at any given point at this time of year and you'll invariably see the last few ducks flying south for the winter.

Aurora's own Special Ducks, the local Special Olympics Swim Team, as well as the Aurora Dunks basketball team, Aurora Eagles golfers, and Aurora Grand Slams softball team, however, have a very busy season ahead of them.

Our local Special Olympians will be putting their best feet forward this month and into the first of December to help raise money to keep them in the pools, on the court, on the course, or on the diamond all through art.

Special Olympics Aurora will take over the Aurora Cultural Centre for the fifth annual ?Special O? Holiday Craft Show? on Sunday, December 1. Although it is a new venue for the group, which previously set up tables at the Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex, organizers promise beautiful crafts, special products from companies like Pampered Chef, prize draws, and much more ? curated by the artists and the special Olympians themselves.

The initiative was the brainchild of Richmond Hill artist Wendy Emery, who will throw open the doors of her home studio on Friday, November 22 to a special show, acting as a kick-off to the ?Special O? season.

?When I got involved with the Aurora Master Ducks, I was introduced to the Special Ducks which was only one team at the time, and I thought that was a cause I could work towards,? says Ms. Emery.

While they started at the SARC, there was limited space, and the venue change will help them expand the event to meet demand from local artists who want to participate. Last year alone, several artists had to be turned away because there was simply no room left in the SARC foyer, according to event organizer Cheryl Duckworth.

?Our community started in 2006,? she explains. ?We started with the swim team first and the pool time was so expensive we were trying to find ways to pay for that. In the first year, Wendy made \$1,100 and from there we have just grown. It is one of our two main fundraisers for the year to keep our four sports going.?

Although they now have four sports in their community, running the swim program remains the most costly, she says. In addition to booking lane times in local pools, the group also has to book lifeguards and when all is said and done, costs can run upwards of \$6,000 just for fees.

?Proceeds from this craft sale goes to our community. It is not necessarily put aside just for the Ducks anymore.?

As for the other sports, organizer Janet Mitchell says a lot of fundraising dollars go towards regular practices now that athletes are

starting to participate at higher levels in their sports, including provincially, nationally, and internationally.

“The whole premise of Special Olympics is individuals with an intellectual disability have sport training and competition opportunities,” she says. “We’re now getting athletes to the next level and there is an extra incurred cost on the community for that. Our philosophy here in Aurora is the financial burden is not on the athlete. It’s on the community instead. That’s why we have an emphasis on fundraising; we want to keep our programs very affordable for the athletes.”

In addition to Ms. Emery’s stained glass, organizers promise jams and jellies, jewellery, Christmas decorations, knitwear, fun animal hats, and much more up for grabs. They encourage people to follow the example of Special Olympian Mary Haberer and make it one of their first Christmas shopping stops.

“Last year we made more than \$2,000 and making \$3,000 would be even better,” says Ms. Emery. “At the end of the day, I know that smiles have been created and, in my way, I have helped create joy.”

Wendy’s Holiday Artisan & Craft Show with 10 per cent of total sales going to Special Olympics Aurora kicks off Friday, November 22 from 7 to 9 p.m., Saturday, November 23 from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., and Sunday, November 24, from 12 Noon to 4 p.m. at 106 Houseman Crescent in Richmond Hill. The main event, the “Special O” Holiday Craft Show and Sale takes place Sunday, December 1 from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the Aurora Cultural Centre.