

## Aurora Chamber of Commerce celebrates 45th anniversary honouring businesses they serve



When Omars Shoes co-owner Raz Khamissa began learning the ins and outs of business from his father, Omar, he didn't understand the importance of Chambers of Commerce to local businesses at first.

But this importance was driven home quickly as he learned more and became wiser.

Omar, alongside Eric Smith, were just two of a handful of local business leaders who saw the importance of such an organization early on, laying the groundwork for what became the Aurora Chamber of Commerce in 1980.

As the Chamber celebrated its 45th anniversary on Thursday night at the Royal Venetian Mansion, it was a full circle moment as the younger Khamissa delivered the keynote address at the Chamber's annual Business Excellence Awards.

The drive to create the Aurora Chamber of Commerce, he said, was powered by the recognized need to create a united voice, one that could advocate for local business, and help shape the future of our Town.

Aurora was a much smaller town back then. In 1968, when we moved to Aurora, it was 5,500 people, so it's changed a lot. Everyone knew everyone, and while the spirit of collaboration was there, the resources were not. It took perseverance, passion, and a shared belief that small businesses deserve to have a strong, organized presence," he said. "In my early years in the business, I'll have to admit that I didn't understand the importance of working with the Chamber and what the Chamber could do to help business thrive. But as time went on and I got a little wiser, I realized that the Chamber is more than just an organization. It's a lifeline.

It's a place where relationships are built, where business owners can come together to share knowledge, solve problems, and support each other. The value of that connection became especially clear to me during one of the hardest times for small business, and that was the COVID-19 pandemic. So, when the pandemic hit, thank God for the Chamber, because the Chamber became our steady anchor in this sea of uncertainty.

Outlining Omars Shoes evolution from children's clothing store Fashion Flair in 1968 to the Omars of today, he said the business was built on the foundation of quality, service and community.

We originally came from South Africa [where] you didn't have the liberty of doing things like that," he said of opening a business like theirs. "My dad was so proud. Aurora was home, and Aurora embraced him and welcomed all of us. From those humble beginnings, we've had the joy of serving generations of families, watching Aurora grow from a small town into this beautiful, bustling community that we see today.

This joy was evident in the room as the Chamber not only reflected on serving a rapidly growing community but celebrated Chamber Champions who have helped them along this mission.

The first such Chamber Champion recognized during the celebration was Steve Falk, who was honoured for going above and beyond helping the Aurora Chamber's annual Street Festival become the resounding success it is today.

The Aurora Chamber Street Festival has been a significant community event each June for over 30 years [and] a big part of the success of this event is the calibre of entertainment, and this individual has taken it upon himself to curate a line-up of entertainers for the last three years that has exceeded expectations," said Debra Wilson, Interim President & CEO of the Aurora Chamber of Commerce. "Steve Falk, we cannot thank you enough for the time you dedicated to orchestrating the musicians on that first Sunday in June. Everything from scheduling, equipment rental, setting up the stage to your own band's performances was executed seamlessly and came together perfectly."

The second Chamber Champion was past Chamber Board Chair Al Wilson, who served on Aurora Council from 2006-2010.

"When I was the President of the Aurora Chamber of Commerce, a big part of that job was reporting to and working with the Board of Directors. I was very fortunate to have great Boards throughout my tenure with the Chamber. Their dedication to the members, thoughtfulness in supporting the development of programs, and helping to steer the Chamber through difficult times was unwavering," said Sandra Ferri, Past President & CEO of the Chamber, who said Wilson was "one individual that stood out in terms of dedication."

"We went through some very interesting times together," she said, reflecting on working with Wilson through the Global Pandemic. "Board positions are volunteer, and they're meant to take up a few hours a month, but throughout the pandemic, I spoke daily to this individual on what was happening with our businesses and how we could best support them. He was always available and always engaged. Post-pandemic, this individual was still always just a phone call away."

"What I valued most was the consistency with which he showed up, always a reliable sounding board who would give me a thoughtful response. Beyond what he did on the Board, he volunteered at the Street Festival and the Home Show every year. He left the Board last year, but to this day, he cares deeply about the Chamber and for our local businesses. We laughed together, we worked together, and we had some soul-searching moments."

Over the course of the evening, the work of the Chamber was lauded and helping to underscore the importance of the Chamber was Mayor Tom Mrakas, who said the community was "fortunate to have a Chamber that works tirelessly to support business success, drive investment, and strengthen our community all year round."

Opening the Celebration was David Olson, Chair of the Aurora Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors.

In an evening reflecting the Chamber's history, Olson outlined a number of forward-thinking initiatives currently being undertaken by the organization, including: start-up grants; the development of the Women's Mastermind program, which supports women in the local business community through professional development and mentorship; and a new Young Professionals Group, which is "designed to become a key tool for businesspeople under 40."

"It's an area for them to expand their networks, create community connections and learn from each other, talk about mentorship, talk about the people that are mentoring them, and then help the people in the room create successful businesses and grow those businesses."

"I think that reflects the value that people are seeing in the Chamber of Commerce in our community, and we're very proud that we're able to drive that feeling of value, that we play a role in helping companies and businesses in our community thrive, and sometimes, like recently, survive," he said. "We're always looking for innovative ways to support our business members and our

community as a whole. We're always looking for feedback, and we very much welcome everybody's thoughts and their comments on things that we may do better and that we may be able to initiate.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter