

Aurora Cultural Centre celebrates 15 years as community success story



In some respects, it was like stepping back in time for Laura Schembri, who served as the Aurora Cultural Centre's founding Executive Director, steering the organization for its first eight years, as she was reunited with a number of people who were there at its start.

More tangibly, however, it was a step forward into an exciting new chapter for the Cultural Centre last Wednesday night as it marked its 15th anniversary of bringing performing and visual arts to the community.

The Centre's launch of the new performing arts season was a multifold celebration as they not only marked the anniversary but their first formal event in Aurora Town Square's new Performance Hall, of which they're eager to be regular users.

"It was thrilling for me," said Schembri, who was among the ribbon-cutters when the historic Church Street School re-opened as the Aurora Cultural Centre in 2010, of Wednesday's gathering. "Having been at the helm there for almost eight years, then leaving something I loved so much just for an opportunity of doing something new, was thrilling. I felt very at home, even in the new space."

It was a celebration, she said, of what her successor, Suzanne Haines, the Cultural Centre Board and, of course, the Town "have done in the second iteration of what the Cultural Centre can be."

The Centre's resultant expansion is something they simply couldn't fathom when they first opened in 2010, she says. When she first stepped into the historic space in 2009, she found little more than an empty shell.

There was no furniture, no staff "all they had was a plan which, in turn, stemmed from an expansive community report on the need to deliver cultural services within Aurora.

The evolution of the Centre, she adds, is "proof that the Board of Directors and the Town at that time were very accurate and forward-thinking for what this Centre could do and what that would mean for the community "and what it would add for a community that didn't have access to that level of art and culture."

"It's demonstrable proof that the original thinkers on all of this were accurate and it was all driven from a desire to bring beautiful arts and culture to our Town and that is a very honourable thing to do," said Schembri. "From that germ to what is becoming now and what it will be just makes me feel great."

In turn, incumbent Executive Director Suzanne Haines said it was a "pleasure to be part of the organization that really did start on

the foundation of what Laura built.?

?The way I saw that foundation was just this complete opening to the community where they could really own 22 Church Street as a space that was a cultural hub and a safe space for people to come and be creative and really participate in a way they wanted to,? said Haines. ?The chapter from 2017 when I arrived to this new, real milestone at 15 years has been one of growth and change, and one really clarifying to the community who we were, who we are, around the professional performing arts, the gallery work that we do, the education programs that are aligned with those two disciplines of art.

?Then the Aurora Historical Society and the Aurora Museum & Archives would really take on that heritage piece of what we had built in 22 Church Street and beyond. We said, ?This is something you're an expert in. We'll do this piece we know really well,' and we have been able to build upon that focus. As most businesses will tell you, if you can focus on the things you're really good at, you will probably be more successful, and I think that has proven to be true.?

The Centre, she added, is now in a ?really exciting place now? and she's thrilled to start ?that first chapter of being here and sharing this incredible space with the community.?

?I want this space to feel like the community owns it, that this is something they really adopt as theirs, as [both] a creation space and a participation space,? said Haines. ?The galleries will continue to be a place where you can stimulate thought and dialogue. The galleries will continue to be a place where we can celebrate different cultures, different ideas, [and] we've got an extra gallery that is going to be activated on the lower floor of 22 Church Street, which never really had that life, and that is an opportunity to work with youth and their art. If we can grow that so the community really does see the gallery as a space of reflection, of dialogue, of seeing beautiful art ? looking at the balance across the season of visual art that inspires new artists and also inspires great conversation in the community as issues arise.

?In the performing arts side, we have 27 shows in this season. We do have a goal of growing a few more in the performing arts hall where we can bring in even some bigger artists while we continue to bring in emerging artists that have that connection and build synergies with established artists so they can have a successful career, and using the plaza in a significant way in the summer that allows access for other artists and for the community to enjoy music at different times. We see it very, very busy.

?It was so powerful for me that (the founding team) were interested in being a part of this next chapter. It tells you a lot about how people feel about the Aurora Cultural Centre, what it means to be involved, and it was a very special moment to see them come back into the fold in that way.?

By Brock Weir