

## Aurora honours its unsung 'roots' at Community Recognition Awards



Community builders who often avoid the spotlight were in the limelight at Aurora Town Square on Monday night as the Town of Aurora hosted the annual Community Recognition Awards.

The Community Recognition Awards are held each year to honour volunteers, community builders, and others who have made important contributions to the Aurora community and even beyond.

'Volunteers are the roots of our community,' said Mayor Tom Mrakas, who served as the evening's emcee. 'We don't often see the roots - they work quietly beneath the surface, unseen and without recognition. Yet they provide the nourishment, strength and stability that allow everything above ground to flourish. Because of strong roots, trees weather storms. Because of strong roots, gardens bloom. And because of volunteers, communities thrive.'

'Every program that inspires a child, every event that brings neighbours together, every helping hand extended to someone in need - all of these are made possible by people like you. You coach our young athletes. You mentor our youth. You visit seniors. You support charities. You organize events. You raise funds. You step forward whenever our community needs you. And while your efforts may not always be visible to everyone, their impact is felt everywhere.'

'Your kindness creates belonging. Your dedication builds resilience. Your generosity helps Aurora continue to grow and flourish.'

**ARTS & CULTURE AWARD - NELIA PACHECO** (Presented to an individual or group that has enhanced our community through their support or promotion of culture, music, visual, performing, or the literary arts)

'Nelia is a driving force in shaping arts and culture in Aurora. As Chair and Programmer of the Aurora Film Circuit, she curates a monthly lineup of diverse, thought-provoking films that engages and inspires the community. Her influence goes beyond cinema; she organized a special Italian Heritage Month screening for Royal Rose Gallery, featuring an artist Q&A and live music. Nelia is also a strong advocate for literary arts, leading Authors Night for Aurora Black Community where Black authors are celebrated through meaningful dialogue and storytelling. Through her dedication, she strengthens Aurora's cultural scene and creates spaces for creativity, connection, and community engagement.'

**COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP AWARD - BROCK WEIR** (Presented to an individual or not-for-profit that has significantly enhanced the Town through their contribution, commitment, and leadership in the areas of charitable giving, civic engagement, community events, or community spirit)

'Brock is a trusted and unifying voice in Aurora whose journalism strengthens civic awareness, celebrates community spirit, and connects residents of all ages. Through fair, balanced, and deeply engaged reporting, he amplifies local initiatives across Aurora Town Square, the Aurora Cultural Centre, the Aurora Museum & Archives, the Aurora Public Library, and countless community events. Brock doesn't just cover stories - he shows up, listens, and builds meaningful relationships that inspire participation and collaboration. With integrity, clear communication, and a genuine commitment to community, Brock's work uplifts organizations,

highlights diverse community celebrations, and helps Aurora thrive as an informed, connected, and vibrant town.?

**COMMUNITY SAFETY AWARD ? MEN'S SHED**(Presented to an individual or organization that is dedicated to the development, promotion, or support of initiatives that improve community safety)

?The Aurora Men's Shed plays an essential role in keeping community events safe, welcoming and well-organized. As volunteer marshals for the Canada Day Parade, they coordinate floats, support crowd control, and ensure spectators remain safely distanced, which are all vital roles for running the parade. At Aurora Town Square events, they guide guests to seating, elevators, washrooms, and exits, reducing confusion and helping seniors and those that require additional mobility support navigate comfortably. Their calm presence, attentiveness, and willingness to assist anyone in need creates a reassuring environment. Reliable, proactive, and community-minded, the Men's Shed strengthens public safety and fosters trust at every event.?

**GOOD BUSINESS AWARD ? HIGHLAND GM**(Presented to an Aurora Business that has shown its commitment to assisting Aurora's economic prosperity, corporate responsibility, and community involvement)

?Highland GM has long been a dedicated community partner in Aurora, consistently supporting local charities, events and organizations. Their contributions extend far beyond financial giving ? they actively participate in initiatives such as Drive for a Cause, sponsor the Run for Southlake, and even serve as the event's pace car. Highland GM generously offers their showroom and space for community programs, including the Optimist Club of Aurora's annual car rally. Their ongoing commitment to Welcoming Arms, the Aurora Sports Hall of Fame, Southlake, and many others reflects a business deeply invested in Aurora's wellbeing, spirit, and continued prosperity.?

**GOOD NEIGHBOUR AWARD ? GORD AND SANDRA SMITH**(Presented to someone who embodies what it means to be a good neighbour, celebrating the simple acts of kindness and compassion that help create connected and vibrant neighbourhoods)

?Gord and Sandra embody what it means to be good neighbours, offering unwavering kindness, support, and compassion for over 20 years. Their care has allowed their 90-year-old neighbour to continue living safely and independently ? from checking in daily and watching over his home, to clearing snow and helping repair storm damage. When he returned from a hospital stay, they arrived with a list in hand, ready to shop, restock his fridge, and ensure he had everything he needed. Gord and Sandra's quiet, consistent generosity has strengthened their street, creating a neighbourhood rooted in trust, connection, and genuine community spirit.?

**GREEN AWARD ? AURORA COMMUNITY ARBORETUM**(Presented to an individual, business, or organization that supports the protection, preservation, sustainability, or conservation of our natural environment)

?The Aurora Community Arboretum (ACA) is a remarkable steward of Aurora's natural environment, developing and preserving 100 acres of parkland through dedicated volunteer leadership and hands-on conservation. From annual tree and daffodil plantings to guided bird walks, educational signage, and protecting the Trumpeter Swans, the ACA fosters awareness, biodiversity, and year-round outdoor enjoyment. Their work includes restoring habitats by controlling invasive species such as [in] the pond, maintaining a thriving nursery, and partnering with the Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority on major planting initiatives. With thousands of volunteer hours and a commitment to education and sustainability, the ACA continues to grow a greener, healthier, and more connected Aurora.?

**HERITAGE AWARD ? JACQUELINE STUART**(Presented to an individual, business, or organization, that supports heritage conservation, education, or awareness in the Town)

?Jacqueline has devoted decades to preserving, interpreting and sharing Aurora's history, leaving an enduring legacy that shapes how the Town understands its past. As Curator of the Aurora Historical Society and Aurora Museum for 25 years, she conducted extensive research, safeguarded artefacts, and uncovered lesser-known stories that broadened the community's heritage narrative. Her expertise supported key heritage designations, informed publications, and inspired engaging public programs. Jacqueline's meticulous documentation of Aurora's properties and histories remains one of the foundation stones of local heritage work today.

Through her scholarship, storytelling, and ongoing volunteerism, she has profoundly advanced the protection and celebration of Aurora's heritage.?

**INCLUSIVITY AWARD ? BODY POSITIVE FITNESS**(Presented to an individual, group or business that has contributed to making the Town a more accessible and inclusive place for all)

?This new exercise and strength training studio is transforming inclusivity in Aurora by creating a welcoming, judgement-free space for people who don't feel comfortable in mainstream fitness environments, especially older adults and those navigating injuries, changing bodies, or new beginnings. With small classes, age-appropriate programming, and personalized support for all abilities and body types, the studio prioritizes confidence, balance, and overall wellbeing over intensity or appearance. Rooted in positivity, connection, and community, the studio goes beyond fitness. It creates meaningful social connection, reduces isolation, and helps people be seen and supported both inside and outside the space. As Aurora's population continues to age, this inclusive environment fills a critical gap by promoting belonging and empowerment for those who have long been overlooked or underserved in traditional fitness spaces.?

**OLDER ADULT VOLUNTEER AWARD ? ANTHONY GARRAMONE**

?Anthony is a tireless volunteer whose enthusiasm and generosity brighten countless events across Aurora. Whether dressing up for children at the Aurora Farmers' Market and Aurora's Christmas Market, checking tickets at the Winter Blues Festival, supporting the Santa Under the Stars Parade, or assisting cultural and community programs, he brings joy, reliability, and spirit to every role. A committed member of the Optimist Club of Aurora, Odd Fellows, the Aurora Legion, and multiple Town organizations, Anthony leads by example ? encouraging fellow older adults to get involved through his positivity and trademark thumbs-up. His passion for community-building makes him an inspiring and deeply valued volunteer.?

**YOUTH VOLUNTEER AWARD ? LUKA DEAN**

?Luka is an inspiring young leader whose passion for environmental stewardship has created meaningful opportunities for youth across Aurora. As the founder of Ecology Enthusiasts, they independently built a thriving, youth-led program that teaches hands-on ecology, ethical environmental practices, and community outreach. Their collaborations ? from bird conservation to pollinator gardens and rain barrel projects ? empower teens to take action and develop real world skills. Luka also brings creativity and enthusiasm to Aurora's Haunted Forest, engaging peers to volunteer alongside them. Their dedication, resilience, and commitment to expanding environmental education make Luka a powerful role model and a positive force shaping Aurora's future.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter