

Aurora's Women's Institute moves well beyond jams and cakes



By Brock Weir

If you think a Women's Institute, once a mainstay of every Canadian community, sits around and makes jellies and flower arrangements all day, think again. Aurora's Women's Institute is back and they're looking to become better than ever.

Reconstituted by residents Cheryl Davies and Jayne McBain last August, they were encouraged by the Federated Women's Institutes of Ontario (FWIO) to bring the ?W.I.? and challenge their long-held image of jelly makers and knitters.

?Unfortunately, the Women's Institute in Ontario was dying,? says Ms. Davies. ?There has been a resurgence in the W.I. in the UK, so they looked to see what they were doing to attract new and younger members. It was just engaging with young women again and going back into the schools to try and engage with young women to get the politicized.?

In its heyday, Canadian W.I.s were ?movers and shakers? in the public sphere and they want to get there again.

A native of Liverpool, Ms. Davies came to Canada and settled in Aurora with her son just over eight years ago. While her son was quick to plant his roots, Ms. Davies says she was looking for a sense of belonging. With that initially outside of her grasp, she hopes the Aurora W.I. can become a ?first port of call? for any new woman coming into the area.

?If you don't know anyone and you're new to Town, you get to meet your neighbours and folks in the coffee shop, but it can be isolating moving into a new town or a new part of the world,? she says. ?I want this to be that first foundation point where they can make friends and make connections and start planting roots.?

In the meantime, the W.I. is making inroads into the community. To mark their 119th anniversary, the FWIO created a children's book and tasked local branches to make quilts and teddy bears to distribute, along with the books, to local groups in need. Late last month, they made their impressive donation to Yellow Brick House, keen to support an organization which in turn supports young families.

The first focus of the Aurora W.I. is ?social and community development.? Although Ms. Davies likens their group to a ?tiny acorn?, she says she hopes they can grow into a mighty oak as advocates for supporting causes related to autism, including support for adult living options and day programs, as well as the rights of grandparents.

?We're open to all members of all walks of life and backgrounds,? she says. ?I believe all women have something to offer, whether it is a skill or even their very being. The larger we become, the more impactful we will be in this community across all ages. I see this as being something for women in each stage of life, whether it is through the college years, motherhood, empty nesters, retirement, bereavement or widowhood. Every woman is looking for something different from the W.I. and I feel at this moment in time,

because we're that little acorn, we can't meet everyone's needs but in time we will be able to.

?Given its connotation and history, people seem to think of the W.I. as women who make jam and sell cakes; that part is there, sure, and something we will always carry on, but there is much more of a push towards political change. The W.I. wants a rebirth, still recognizing what they achieved in the past and moving forward to inspire and aspire young women to be active members of the community. We're still a tiny acorn, but the world is our oyster!?

For more on the Aurora Women's Institute, look them up on Facebook, visit www.fwio.on.ca, contact them by email at auroraWI2015@gmail.com or call 905-395-4229.