

Beverley Wood named Aurora's Citizen of the Year



By Brock Weir

Beverley Wood lives by the motto it 'amazing what one can learn when one opens up one's ears.'

But, the sound might have been deafening for Ms. Wood on Monday night when she was named Aurora's Citizen of the Year.

Ms. Wood received her recognition from Mayor Geoffrey Dawe and Council on Monday night at the Community Recognition Awards, held at the Aurora Seniors' Centre.

She succeeds Auroran founder and former councillor Ron Wallace to the post.

A founder of Welcoming Arms, the outreach group bringing together Trinity Anglican Church, Aurora United Church, Our Lady of Grace Catholic Church, and Community Campus Church, Ms. Wood was celebrated for her tireless community service stretching back nearly 40 years.

'She can be described no better than as a woman who gets stuff done, no matter the time, the place, or the circumstance,' said Mayor Dawe, introducing the new Citizen of the Year. 'From the multiple members of the community that nominated her, the words 'gracious', 'welcoming' and 'deserving' occurred frequently.

'As a founding member of Welcoming Arms, our Citizen of the Year has diligently worked to bring together five different churches to support people in crisis ' spiritually, socially and financially. Every Wednesday evening, you can find her at Trinity serving all members of our community through the Welcome Table program.'

Mayor Dawe also hailed her for her work outside Trinity, including her volunteer work for the PROBUS Club, Empty Bowls, which brings together area artists through the Pine Tree Potters Guild and local chefs in the popular annual fundraiser, as well as her work as a citizen-at-large.

"The thank you notes arrive from her promptly and she is always the first person to show her gratitude," Mayor Dawe concluded. "Tonight, however, we are here to thank her for her tremendous contributions and selfless dedication to the Town of Aurora."

Following a lengthy standing ovation, Ms. Wood made her way to the stage where she was greeted by the Mayor and each member of Council. Although she has received many awards in the past, including the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Medal in 2012, this one, she said, left her nearly speechless.

"I feel very touched, very overwhelmed, and very, very grateful," Ms. Wood told The Auroran after receiving hugs and gifts from several friends and family in the audience. "Aurora is a very special place for me, and it has always been. It is a place that has allowed me to grow and get to know the community. I think the community work that we do has invited me to really get to know who my neighbours are and we have some really wonderful neighbours."

Ms. Wood, an educator by trade, with a long background at Huron University College, first moved to Aurora in 1976. From there, she hit the ground running, becoming an active member of both her civic and church community.

In 1978, for instance, she was one of 13 members of the Trinity community who sponsored a family of Vietnamese Boat People to come and plant their new roots in Aurora. That mission was a success and the family has flourished, meeting regularly with their sponsors to this day.

She cites her parents as "very, very giving people" who truly set the example. As an educator, those experiences were driven home continually and that line of work opened up many doors.

As co-founder of Welcome Table, an initiative to provide not just food, but also a "listening heart" to people in distress, she has seen their initial founding serving just four people at their first dinner, expanding to an average of serving 120 people each Wednesday night.

"It is an incredible gift for all of us, whether you are a volunteer or coming to dinner because we get to meet our community," says Ms. Wood.

Welcome Table, in turn, lead to Welcoming Arms.

At one time, each parish had their own outreach programs and benevolence funds but partly under Ms. Wood's initiative, they realised they were stronger together. In 2006, they started their mission at Our Lady of Grace, but when space became available at The Rectory behind Trinity, they quickly snapped it up and are there to this day.

"We work very well together," said Ms. Wood. "Our aim is to be assistance to those people who are in need in Aurora. It could be any kind of need and our biggest gift is we are able to listen. Our visits just today were amazing. We might not have all the answers, but we try and one thing I feel very strongly about is pooling our resources. I can't begin to tell you what I have learned by just opening up my heart and opening up my ears."

One person who has seen Ms. Wood's work in action is Rev. Dawn Davis of Trinity. She said the recognition of Ms. Wood was "long overdue", particularly for someone who "never looks for the limelight.

"It is in the little conversations I have with people where I can't count the times where they say, 'I was at a crossroads in my life when I thought I wasn't going to make it, and then I met Beverley Wood,'" said Rev. Davis of where Ms. Wood has made a difference.

She recalled an Egyptian family who had recently arrived in Canada, stopping by Trinity on an Easter Morning not quite sure where to go or what to do. They crossed paths with Ms. Wood and she took them into her home, served them a full Easter Dinner, and helped them settle into their new life. And this story, she said, is one of many.

?She has a profound faith and that gives her strength you can't measure. She calls you to be your best person. She doesn't make you dependent on her; she calls you to be strong and because she is there beside you, you know you can be.?