

BROCK'S BANTER: Taking Stock

Taking stock of your own community

By Brock Weir

There were many iterations of my column this week. Ideas were plotted, statements revised, and viewpoints honed, but many versions ended up in the bin.

Several events over the previous week, some tragic, others combining tragedy and hope, conspired to make these ideas, gripes, and other observations seem so insignificant in a wider context.

?I wonder if there is a general age when people start thinking or feeling they are over the hill,? I wrote in the first iteration. There as a point to follow (and a good one, my own opinion) but the tragedy that unfolded just north of the St. John's Sideroad railway crossing last week, just made me shake my head at my own statement.

Thursday's benefit for young Laura, a Grade 2 student at St. Joseph Catholic Elementary School, simply made me roll my eyes harder at myself.

What could I possibly have to legitimately complain about when that little girl and her parents are going through a devastating trial in their lives?

It was an unforgettable experience standing on the sidelines as students, parents, teachers, and the community at large packed the ballroom to have a great time, showcase their talent, and say many a prayer for that family now transplanted in Texas with the singular, simple and all-important purpose of saving their daughter's life.

Local companies donated thousands of dollars-worth of merchandise to the cause, professional musicians around the Greater Toronto Area offered their services all in the name of Laura, while her friends, and classmates, moved by her plight took to the stage to equally move the crowd.

Students, who say a prayer for her recovery every single day in their class were having a great time. It was clear, however, that while they are aware of her illness, they don't fully grasp the gravity of the situation. The same cannot be said, however, for the parents who came with them.

Although they too seemed to have a great time during the evening, the gravity visibly hit home to each and every one of them each time someone came up to the podium to share a personal story about Laura and her family, or pictures of her smiling bravely in her hospital bed were projected onto a large screen above the crowd.

Three realities unfolded right before my eyes. The first was of the children, concerned but carefree in their innocence, boogying away in front of the stage, hopping up on stage, letting the music carry them away while the pros were having a go, and having an absolute ball with glow-sticks, having their nails painted, and using some of the open space to execute a cartwheel or two.

The second was the parents, finding joy in watching their own kids having a blast, missing their bedtimes be damned, all the while knowing all too well the pain Laura's family are experiencing right now and counting their lucky stars that it's not them.

The third, and perhaps, most important, is the sense of community that was on display. Regardless of whether they were friends, classmates, or fellow St. Joseph parents, fellow parishioners at their Polish Catholic Church in Toronto or friends from our local Our Lady of Grace Community, companies lending a hand through their products and services in silent auctions, or professionals lending their voices to something greater than their own, this is truly what the community is about.

Deliberations around the Council table as to how high their property taxes might go up this year as likely the furthest thing from their minds. The same can be said of some of the petty squabbles that have permeated the last few weeks of 2014 so far in the lead-up to a contentious election campaign, or any variety of scandal or concern brewing at the Provincial or Federal level.

The same can most likely be said for the Grade 12 students, parents, and faculty at ESC Renaissance this week, following the death of one of their own. Renaissance students both past and present almost immediately took to social media like Facebook to express their grief, condolences to his family, but also call for greater support within the school system for victims of bullying.

They came together Friday afternoon to accept a \$10,000 cheque from Laurentian University to put towards their prom and celebrate Alexander's life. Any concerns they had over whether they money should be used to support mental health rather than prom, as well as bullying within the school, seemed to evaporate from the time being when his parents Richard and Marsha, unexpectedly came up on stage with remarkable bravery to help students accept the cheque and celebrate their collective win and their son's life together. These two distinct instances helped to put so much into perspective this week and, speaking entirely for myself, clarified just what this community is all about. It is not about gripes stemming from garbage pickup, or golf course owners who might have to file a little extra paperwork to cut down the trees they need, or myopically defending the needs and wants of specific interest groups as

veteran, incumbent, and aspiring politicians practice their calisthenics ahead of a long-haul on the campaign trail. As that time comes near, all politicians should take a good and thorough look at just what defines the very community they are striving to serve and do their utmost to defend it.

BOARDWALK EMPIRE

While Aurora has a boardwalk running through the McKenzie Marsh on its extension of the Nokiidaa Trail, the same cannot be said, at least not yet, for the Aurora Community Arboretum. The title of the HBO show dreamt up by Martin Scorsese about American prohibition, bootlegging and rum running came to mind last week during discussions around the Council table on finding a good and practical use for Petch House.

Councillor Paul Pirri suggested a presumably small scale distillery to produce a uniquely Aurora kind of whiskey. Some might have chuckled around the table, I think it is a good idea. Well, perhaps not whisky per se, but it is the kind of out-of-the-box thinking that is required to make the restoration and reconstruction of that old log cabin worthwhile in the end.

Other suggestions have included a tourist information centre and gift shop which, in my view, would ultimately prove to have limited appeal. An interpretive centre where students can come and learn about the founding of Aurora, and experience a few hands-on lessons about the pioneer spirit as suggested early in the run might be a bit closer to the mark.

Time and again, however, we keep hearing about a sense of two Aurora divided often by Industrial Parkway. It is not an outrageous suggestion. Suggestions on the future of an Aurora museum have, for instance, included calls for a heritage centre people on the east side of Aurora can enjoy. There have also been calls for a satellite branch of the Aurora Public Library closer to the 404.

It might be time for the powers that be to take a closer look at Petch House to find some of these solutions. Whiskey aficionados aside, perhaps its ideal use would be as a satellite for the Aurora Public Library or any other local institution which has been eyeing eastern Aurora for the future, including as a heritage classroom to complement the Aurora Historical Society's future inroads into local schools.