

Business Excellence recognized and celebrated at annual Chamber gala



It was a night of celebration in the local business community on Wednesday evening as the Aurora Chamber of Commerce honoured the best of the best at their annual Business Excellence Awards.

Held at the Royal Venetian Mansion and emceed by Mike Smith of Smith Rogers Financial, the gala honoured businesses and non-profits for their community participation, skilled trades, and personal, seniors' and food services. For the first time this year, members of the public had a chance to take part in the process as the Chamber rolled out their inaugural People's Choice Award, which saw more than 2,000 votes come in from the community.

"I really do want to thank all of you for the critical role you play in our community," said Mayor Tom Mrakas, acknowledging both the Chamber and the evening's nominees. "It is pretty clear that a big part of the community's strength lies with its local businesses and non-profits. All of you truly help strengthen Aurora each and every day. Not only are you helping grow our economy, providing great job opportunities for people, you simply make our community more dynamic and help ensure we continue to have that very high quality of life Aurora has become known for. The truth is you all play a central role in helping us attract more investments to Aurora as we continue to grow.

"When I meet with businesses looking to potentially open up in Aurora, they tell me that a big factor in their decision is how strong the local business community is and that is because they want to be a part of a community that has amazing things to offer their families and the families of their employees. They also want to be in a community where there are other inventors and people on the cutting-edge of their industries. The reality is we're welcoming new businesses to Aurora all the time and we're diversifying our economy. You all deserve a lot of credit to make that happen."

NON-PROFIT AWARD ? York Region Food Network

(Finalists: Addiction Services Central Ontario, Canadian Mental Health Association York Region and South Simcoe, Yellow Brick House)

The first award of the evening honoured non-profits that work tirelessly to support the community and demonstrate leadership within it.

Taking top honours this year was the York Region Food Network.

In a video before the winner was announced, York Region Food Network (YRFN) Executive Director Kate Greavette said they are dedicated to "build a more inclusive, connected and healthy community" through myriad programs, including their Community Kitchen classes, Good Food Boxes distributing fresh and healthy options to the community, and their growing list of local markets which offer the community fresh produce at "a fraction of the price of grocery stores."

"Everything we do is about building community connections, building relationships, and making sure we provide dignified food access" impacting food insecurity," said Greavette. "We are very grateful to the Aurora Chamber of Commerce for the recognition and to be in this category."

SENIORS SUPPORT PROVIDER AWARD ? TIE: Chartwell Park Place & Delmanor Aurora

(Nominees: HosPall Private Homecare, The Roxborough Retirement Residence)

Two of the community's seniors' residences shared top honours in this category, which recognizes outstanding service for senior citizens in facilities, housing, and in-home care.

Speaking to their nomination, Chartwell Park Place said since their foundation in 1991 they have been "pretty much the pioneers in the retirement industry here in Aurora."

"We offer more housing, quality of life for older adults with all the amenities, all the services that they need, as well as care and loving staff and above all this is their new home, so they are able to have family and friends into this so-called mansion. Internally and externally, we have always been supportive of the community. I love being a part of the communities we live in. Because we have over 25 years, and almost 30 years of experience, we are the leaders in this industry and we are continuously improving? training our staff, making sure we have those top-notch quality services we have to offer residents."

Accepting the award, Patti Smith said Chartwell "just loves to serve the community."

"I am proud to say that my journey started with Chartwell when I looked for my father and I knew this is what I wanted to do. It's an honour and a pleasure to serve your seniors in your community."

Accepting the award on behalf of Delmanor was Julie Shuster, Community Relations Manager for the residence.

"This is a really great honour and I want to congratulate everyone else in our category," she said. "Delmanor is two-and-a-half years old and we couldn't be more proud to be a part of the Aurora community. Tridel is our parent company and we always take great pride whenever we bring a building to a community, to become a part of the community. Thank you so much for this honour."

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION AWARD ? MR Menswear

(Nominees: Canadian Federation of University Women Aurora/Newmarket, Key Advantage Team, Javed S. Khan)

MR Meanswear and owner Mike Rathke were celebrated with the Community Participation Award, which recognizes a business or employer who shows a strong commitment to giving back through participation in businesses and community organizations.

Rathke and his business were honoured for their tireless support of Southlake Regional Health Centre and its Regional Cancer Centre, a cause very close to his heart.

"I have been around a while and I love this business and love the community," said Rathke, a two-time cancer survivor who received tremendous support from Southlake. "We just announced this past year at our fashion show that we had raised \$75,000 and we are now just shy of a quarter-of-a-million."

PERSONAL SERVICE PROVIDER AWARD ? Transcend Wellness Connection

(Nominees: Crown Hair Lounge, Faceology Mobile Facial Spa, Starks Barber Company)

In a category honouring personal service providers that exhibit extraordinary professional service and support to the community, Transcend Wellness Connection came out on top for their ?unique therapeutic treatments in a calming, home-like environment?

?Our practitioners focus on providing balanced care that engages both body and mind, addressing both physical and emotional symptoms,? said owner Juliette Sharone. ?Whether it is sleep disorders or various physical conditions, we're here to help. From the moment our clients walk through the doors, we aim to create a space where they can decompress and leave their stresses in the outside world.

?Thank you so much for this incredible honour ? you'll have to forgive me, I'm a massage therapist, so I am used to everybody being face-down and not looking at me when I am talking! At Transcend Wellness Connection, we believe in the power of community and teamwork. I think this is a reflection of that. I am super proud of their commitment and every individual in the team is what has made this possible. We provide exceptional care and support to our patients and this recognition means the world to us.?

FOOD SERVICE/HOSPITALITY AWARD ? (Tie) Wicked Eats & The Armoury

(Nominees: A Million Mouthfuls Catering and Locale Aurora)

It was another shared award in the Food Service/Hospitality category with restaurant Wicked Eats being recognized alongside the Armoury, home for Niagara College's Canadian Food & Wine Institute.

It was something of a full circle moment for Wicked Eats owner Robert Stewart, who was raised in Aurora, but came back to the community 60 years later following his retirement.

?I moved here in 2019 after leaving the corporate world,? he said, recognizing his team with thanks. ?My last thought was to get back into the restaurant business. These are the reasons why you get back into the restaurant business.?

Restaurants, he said, were part of the ?fabric of society,? he added.

?Restaurants, as everyone knows, got the crap kicked out of it and I am just glad we're still kicking and screaming,? he concluded. ?This [award is] for my staff.?

Although the Armoury team was unable to attend the ceremony, in a video shared with the audience, Events and Hospitality Manager Emily Hlusko-Huard says the Armoury prides itself on fostering emerging industry talent.

?We are operated under the Niagara College Learning Enterprise corporation, which is a non-profit subsidy of Niagara College. All of our revenues are re-invested into education and we focus on hiring the next level of hospitality professional,? she said. ?We are here because of our community, so we think it is extremely important or people to give back to organizations like the Aurora Sports Hall of Fame and, outside Aurora, to Inn from the Cold, supporting our community in that need. We're over the moon about this.?

SKILLED TRADES AWARD ? North Rock Group

(Nominees: De Ville Group of Companies, Summers & Smith Cooling and Heating, and Tri-Tech Pinnacle)

The Skilled Trades Award recognizes excellence in the skilled trades that consistently provide excellent services and customer experiences ? and this year's winner, North Rock Group, is an organization that provides services to all of Aurora, but often fly under the radar.

Construction contractors, they are often among the team working hard to re-line local sewer and water pipes, and working on other kinds of infrastructure.

‘Any major disaster that happens in the world, what people want is clean water,’ said Northern Rock co-founder George Di Pede, whose nomination video showed he and his crew at a water pipe relining site. ‘We’re really proud of what we do. Once we’re done [with a project], the way we look at it is we’re like a rose bush: when we’re there, we’re the thorns when all is painful; when we get to the end, at the top is a beautiful rose.’

PEOPLE'S CHOICE AWARD: Oakridge's Fashions

(Runners-Up: Aristica Ballroom Dancing & Thrive Gymnastics)

The Aurora Chamber of Commerce's inaugural People's Choice Award went to a business that prides itself on its wide-reaching clientele: Oakridge's Fashions.

Store owner Deb Clark told the audience her ‘heart has been very, very full’ not only by the nomination, but by being in the company of the other nominees across the board.

‘As I listen to all the work so many of you have been doing, and to the great joy that comes to be a nominee, it strikes me we’re all in this room incredibly blessed to have the support of one another,’ she said. ‘I think I am very blessed I had a mother who taught me at a very young age that hard work never killed anyone and a father who instilled in me a real love of being kind and supporting your community. I am incredibly blessed to have a rockstar husband in my Joe who champions everything I attempt and is always there to give me the most loving support and guidance, and a great son and daughter as well.’

‘I am blessed to walk into Oakridge's every day to a team of colleagues who really genuinely believe that their number-one goal all day long is to take every woman who walks through that door and makes her feel wonderful as she turns around and walks back out. I am very grateful to have Oakridge's Fashions as, yes, a job, but as a venue and an opportunity to do the thing I love to do and to honour those words of my mum and my dad and to give back to our wonderful community that we’re so very lucky to live in.’

By Brock Weir