

Businesses celebrated by Chamber at annual awards gala



If all that glitters is gold, Aurora's businesses shone at a platinum level last week as the Aurora Chamber of Commerce hosted its annual Business Excellence Awards.

Held at the Royal Venetian Mansion on Wednesday, September 21, with an "All That Glitters is Gold Theme," three finalists in the categories of Hospitality, New Business, Company Culture, Manufacturer, Family-Run Business, Professional Service, and Non-Profit were given their moment in the spotlight and a chance to tell their story to their business peers, elected officials, and even Magna founder Frank Stronach, who served as one of the evening's keynote speakers and emerged from the evening as an award-winner himself.

This week and next, we will share the stories of the winners in each category in the order presented.

NON-PROFIT

First up, was the Non-Profit category, which recognized "the valuable contributions non-profit organizations make to our community."

Nominated alongside the Canadian Mental Health Association of York Region and South Simcoe, and Rose of Sharon Services for Young Mothers, the winner in this category, Abuse Hurts and founder Ellen Campbell, know the value of non-profits all too well.

Impacted personally by their mission, Ms. Campbell set out to make a difference.

"Our agency provides support to agencies throughout York Region and actually further south," she said in a video presentation alongside her fellow nominees. "What we do is provide support for women and children, and sometimes men, coming out of abusive situations. We provide clothing and housewares, products and toiletries, sometimes furniture, and we provide support really for everything from shelters, to women's pregnancy centres. We also support men and that's our main program called Delivering Hope.

"Pre-COVID, we were serving about 8,000 women and children and sometimes men each year. A lot of our fundraising comes through fundraising from Corus Entertainment, which does a big event for us every Christmas, and just from general donations. We are not a government agency because we lobby for legislative reform and we do not take government funding. We have a store here called Delivering Hope Boutique where you can get amazing bargains: \$10 for everything and no woman comes in and just buys \$10 worth of stuff. That's one of our main fundraisers, and then just general donations."

Accepting the honour on behalf of the organization, which was founded more than 30 years ago in her basement, Ms. Campbell, a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, made a brief but emotional statement.

"30 years ago, I was lined up in the psych ward because of my abuse and I was going to kill myself," she said. "Thirty years later, I'm here. Thank you."

COMPANY CULTURE

Next up was the Company Culture Award, which "recognizes a business whose policies and practices promote a culture that values innovative solutions that make it a great place to work, with a focus on innovative recruitment, retention, culture and talent management."

This year's award went to KTI Limited, which was nominated alongside CP Flexible Packaging and CUBE.

In their video presentation, the distributors of products in the natural gas, water, and electricity utility industry said over their time in Aurora in the past 35 years, they have grown to 100 employees from a family-run business of "three or four."

"We tried to continue the foundation of that family culture in our business and extended it across the last 35 years so each one of our employees today takes that foundation forward and helps our customers deliver solutions based on that," they said. "I think the staff at KTI value the family culture that we've built, a culture of trust and honesty, a culture of transparency and community, and most of all I think we like to have fun and enjoy what we do, and try to make sure that extends through to each one of our activities. We offer a lot of benefits to our employees: the typical benefits of health and wellness, but we're very flexible in how we work, with a modified work from home program, ample vacation and a very flexible relationship with the company. We try to treat employees like family and have them understand if they have a problem or question or need some help, we're here for them and that extends across the entire organization.

"We really value community culture here at KTI. We have been big believers in giving back to our communities across the country. We strongly believe in supporting hospitals and children's charities, local Rotary programs—we're really here to help make sure we leave this planet a better place than what we started from."

NEW BUSINESS

The evening took a sweet turn upon the presentation of the New Business Award. Nominated in this category were Gabby's Plant Rescue, Holiday Inn Express, and winner Chocolate & Co, a chocolate and gelato store on Yonge Street at Brookland.

Opened in November of 2020 at the height of the pandemic, Chocolate and Co. makes everything on site with a focus on "quality ingredients, sourcing ingredients, just," in the words of business founder Clayton Dixon, "to give everyone the best possible experience I can.

"I have always enjoyed chocolate and liked it so much that I couldn't find a lot of the truffles I tasted in my younger years, so I basically decided to make them, so it is more of a European tradition," said Dixon. "It's not an easy thing to master, so after 20 years of making it, doing it, you realize you have something that very few people have experienced unless they have travelled internationally.

"When I turned 50, it became that crunch time: do it now or just keep it as a hobby. Obviously, I want to be that store that people like to go to, so we spend the extra energy to paint the windows and people tell us how much their kids like to see what the window paintings are going to be next. When we had the Street Festival, we weren't out there to sell products; we basically did free face painting.

"We feel it is important to be a part of the community. In Aurora, people notice you're working really hard and trying to do

something special. Just to be different and a part of that something special that people take notice of. It feels really great to be recognized, and thanks very much.?

PROFESSIONAL SERVICES

Another Yonge Street-based business, Carruthers and Associates, took home top honours in the Professional Services category, nominated with Julien Laurion of Big Tuna Realty and Foundations BTS.

?We help our clients with their planning. We help them plan for their tomorrows today,? said Carruthers' Jennifer Walker; that is through working with individuals and their own plans for retirement, education, for themselves and their children, for their estate planning. We also work with business owners and it has really been an important factor over these last years of COVID as we have helped business owners treat their employees fairly and evenly, help them with their employee benefits, and help them with their own succession planning.

?Being a part of this community has been really a wonderful way for us to establish ourselves. We've become involved in many charities including the Able Network, Margaret Bahen Hospice, the Aurora Cultural Centre, many opportunities, including also both chambers from Aurora and Newmarket. We have been invited guests to speak to different charities, to different events, and we welcome more opportunities to become more and more engrained in this community. It's important that we give back. As we've established ourselves, we've given back to those around us, including our clients and our colleagues.

?We're thrilled to be nominated for this award. Recognition is always so great and it also helps us to spread our news and news about all those charities that we work with. It's a great opportunity to be involved in the community, to be recognized by that community, and to continue that whole message.?

NEXT WEEK'S CATEGORIES: Hospitality (Tie: Frank's Organic Garden & Hurst Bakery); Manufacturer (BUNN); and Family-Run Business: Omar's Shoes.

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