

Businesses thank Chamber for Support at Excellence Awards



The best of Aurora's business community came together to celebrate their own on October 18 as the Aurora Chamber of Commerce hosted its annual Business Excellence Awards and Celebration.

Emceed by Steve Falk, it was an evening to recognize outstanding businesses large and small, home entrepreneurs, non-profits and more.

"Tonight is all about recognizing the incredible businesses and non-profits in our community and the contributions they make to our Town," said Mayor Tom Mrakas. "I want to congratulate all finalists. You are truly setting the bar for business excellence in Aurora. Our business community truly is the lifeblood of our Town, providing jobs for so many residents and making our communities more vibrant and dynamic places.

"The reality is business owners and entrepreneurs all have a unique set of skills and attributes in order to succeed. You have to be willing to take on the risk and work incredibly long hours. You have to be creative, innovative and resilient. Here in Aurora, I see this in so many of you and I really couldn't be prouder to be Mayor of a Town with such strong and dynamic businesses."

Taking home top honours were:

Home-Based Business: Stella Graphix

Non-Profit: Construct ? A Social Enterprise by Blue Door Shelters

Innovation: Axiom Group Inc.

Entrepreneur: Lighthouse Learning & Development Centre

Health and Wellness: Sparkle Pharmacy

Retail/Franchise: Coup de Foudre Ladies Luxury Lingerie

Community Participation: Mike Smith, Smith Rogers Financial

This week, in the second of three articles, The Auroran will spotlight the winners of the Home-Based Business, Entrepreneur, Retail/Franchise Category, and Community Participation.

ENTREPRENEUR ? Lighthouse Learning & Development Services

This award recognizes ?a person who has demonstrated the entrepreneurial spirit and has started his or her own business in Aurora.? Lighthouse shared the nomination with C.R.E.A.M. Barbershop and Yours Conveniently.

Lighthouse is a therapy and education centre for children on the autism spectrum. Opening in 2015, it was the vision of co-founder Serena Thompson, whose son Daniel is on the spectrum.

?I wanted to ensure he could reach his top potential and now we're working with all families in the community to help their kids reach their top potential, too,? said Thompson in a nomination video which unspooled to audiences at the Royal Venetian Mansion before the winners were announced. ?My team is everything. I didn't get a choice that I had a child with autism. I was given this boy and I needed to make sure that I gave him everything he needed. My team chooses this every single day. Every single day they choose to come in and work hard and love our kids. I am so honoured and our kids never get recognized? people working with kids with autism don't get recognized and to be put in this category by the Chamber?for our kids, it's everything because it means they really do matter, people are starting to see that they matter, and it is so important for the community.?

At the podium accepting the award, Thompson said it was an ?overwhelming? honour to win.

?More often than not our kids are overlooked and disregarded, which is so sad because they really are so amazing. For the Chamber team, to have spent the time that they have with us, coming to our events and spending time with our children, doesn't happen ever; that acknowledgement for many is?very special to us. As we transitioned into a registered charity, for the Chamber to be there for us and support our kids and come in and spend time with them and talk with them, I can't thank you enough because, by extension, you also supported and acknowledged the people who worked with them every day and that is something that doesn't happen.?

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION ? Mike Smith, Smith-Rogers Financial

The Community Participation Award recognizes ?a business or employee that shows a strong commitment to giving back through participation, for business and community organizations and our charitable events.? Smith was nominated alongside North Dance Company and Neighbour Media.

Smith, in his nomination video, said for 35 years he has dedicated his professional career ?to helping people in the community? and described himself as a ?builder.?

Among the causes he's supported is Southlake Regional Health Centre, where he has served on the Board, the Aurora Sports Hall of Fame, and as founder of 100 Men Who Give a Damn Newmarket-Aurora, a group inspired by 100 Women Who Care Central York Region.

?We have given over \$200,000 to local grassroots charities,? he said.

Accepting the award, he said he has ?basic core principles: help people ? if you can't help them with what you do, help give them a resource; we prescribe advice to people like we would provide for our own family.?

?Giving back is my favourite part of this role,? said Smith. ?I really love what I do and our community. Every year, probably over five per cent, maybe a little more?of our revenue goes back into the community that we serve and we're happy to do it. I believe actions and habits are taught not caught. My folks are here tonight and [their work] caught my eye. They became better people, our Town became a better part of our world, and it is nice to see that they're still here doing good things in our community and I hope my kids are?. The things I get involved with speak to me as a person, as a father and a friend. If it is important to my friends it is

important to me, and I do it because I realize how fortunate we are to live in this community and work in this community. Someone once said to me, it is important to make a buck and it is even more important to make a difference and I think that is what I have learned the most.?

HOME-BASED BUSINESS ? Stella Graphix

The Home-Based Business Award recognizes those in the fields of professional services, product sales, personal care, consulting, and coaching, recognizing the outstanding achievements of the company growth, excellence in product or service, and work in the community.?

Stella Graphix was nominated alongside Brainy Games and Kitchen Table CEOs.

Stella Graphix is a full-service boutique design and marketing studio serving Aurora and beyond, said business owner Stella Grinfeld in their nomination video.

Our mission is to help businesses and non-profits connect with their customers through innovative design, forward-thinking market, and engaging content strategy. Being small and home-based doesn't stop us from delivering big results for our clients. In fact, this is the very reason our clients love to work with us and truly value the personal approach we take when it comes to customer service and the work we produce.?

Accepting the award, she said she was overwhelmed by the immense amount of warmth and support she had received from the Chamber.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank our amazing clients for entrusting us with their visions. I would like to thank our small but very mighty team and I would especially like to thank my husband, who left his career to join the company about three years ago during COVID and we never looked back. You're here to pick me up from all the entrepreneurial downs and here to celebrate all the ups?. This business is not just a way we make our living but it is really the foundation for our entire family. I hope that this is passed on from generation to generation and lives on for many years?.I would like to really thank our community because we really love to help other businesses grow and cheer for them and help them find their success.

RETAIL/FRANCHISE ? Coup de Foudre Lingerie

The Retail/Franchise Award goes to retail businesses, including franchises, that consistently provide excellent products and/or services, outstanding hospitality and Aurora customer experience.? Coup de Foudre was nominated with Aurora Music Academy and Ivish Interiors.

Owner Christine Hellstrom has been in the lingerie business in Aurora for almost 12 years and loving every minute of it.?

My business is unique because I fit you and your body type rather than a generic department store, she said in her video. Having good customer service means I pride myself on a product that will fit you, that you're comfortable with and you will come back year after year.?

Her mission, she said, is to make people feel good, proud and happy.?

Accepting the award, she thanked the Aurora Chamber Ladies in particular.

I love you supporting me as I love supporting you, said the custom bra fitter to laughter from the audience. Gentlemen, I am both thankful and very supportive you had to do the interview at a lingerie store. This has been a heck of a journey. I have been around now for about 11 years and I tease that it feels like 22. Thank you for the nomination, everybody. I am seeing faces I can recognize and, don't worry, your secrets are safe with me!?

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter