

## Celebration highlights progress, affordable housing



**By Brock Weir**

As children played and parents looked on with pride, residents of Aurora's Charles Darrow Co-Op took a moment to think about how far they have come over the last 25 years.

Indeed, it was a time for celebration and reflection as the community came together to celebrate their silver anniversary with a special all-day street party on Saturday, featuring a barbecue, a zoo on wheels, special awards and even a performance from Silver Elvis.

For the people who have lived in the co-operative housing development since its inception, it was a day to show how the community has grown and how they have grown with it.

25 years ago I was in Yellow Brick House, and while I was in Yellow Brick House, we, a group of women, built the whole co-op, said one resident. I don't think people realise the opportunity that moving in here offered me and other women. I was on subsidy and I had been on subsidy for years. Finally I got over that bump, have been with the Board of Education and I just want people to take a moment to realise the opportunity and the privilege that we have living in a co-op.

These opportunities and privileges were not lost on the women who helped throw the celebration. Lynda Urry-Wilson told The Auroran that the celebration meant a lot to her and was a reflection of the residents looking after each other.

While local dignitaries, including Aurora Mayor Geoffrey Dawe, and former Ontario cabinet minister Charles Beer, who was the area's MPP at the time when the Charles Darrow Co-Op was finding its feet, heralded the complex as a success story, they also underscored what they believed was more of a drive to provide affordable community housing.

This celebration recognizes that we're a very diverse community and there are a lot of different needs in our community, said Mayor Dawe. Charles Darrow addresses one of those very important [issues]. There is obviously a need for this. In Aurora, I think we have to be a little more cognizant of those needs. Affordable housing is key. Everybody likes to put a different price tag on it, but affordable housing is what is really needed.

Mr. Beer reiterated the tremendous value the community brings to Aurora and York Region. For him, the celebration was the realisation of a vision almost 30 years in the making.

When I think back to when I was a fairly newly-minted MPP, this began with the hope and idea that people could come together in cooperative housing and that they could work together, and they would be empowered, said Mr. Beer.

I think one always would hope there would be more affordable housing. This is one of the early co-ops and, as a movement, it has

taken off and really played an important role and provides support to so many individuals. Leadership in anything is important and there has been some remarkable leadership with the people here.?

Building leadership within the community has been a hallmark of Charles Darrow's growth over the last few years. The concerted efforts to build leadership programs on the part of the board of directors, led by Shona Pelly, have worked hand-in-hand with several initiatives brought into the co-op by the United Way of York Region.

Their programs have ranged from youth mentoring programs where teen residents take younger kids under their wings, leadership programs for young men and women, and other initiatives to provide creative outlets for teens, particularly young women in conjunction with Girls Inc.

Daniele Zanotti, the United Way of York Region's CEO, said that the success of the programs shows the power of residents coming together.

?The United Way used to rely on agencies and programs going in and providing help in the communities,? he said. ?For us, this was huge, learning about people and neighbours actually solving issues on their own. It has changed the way we think about our work and how people can work in their neighbourhood to create healthy lifestyles, programs for the kids, and leadership. We're so honoured they would partner with us and it is a testament that real change happens amongst neighbourhoods working together, not necessarily with agencies coming in.

?I will never forget being here a while back in the summer, and one of the kids told me, ?I am not embarrassed to have other kids from my school come to Charles Darrow anymore.' That is huge to say to a kid, ?come to my house.'?