

Chamber CEO reflects on career driven to make a difference



Last week's Business Excellence Awards was a double-fold celebration as the business community recognized their own and also celebrated the career of outgoing Aurora Chamber of Commerce CEO Sandra Ferri.

Ferri, who took the helm of the Chamber in 2017, announced her retirement this summer, effective at the end of the year.

Taking the stage at the Royal Venetian Mansion on October 23, she reflected in the journey that led her to Aurora, a place she now considers a home away from home.

A resident of Vaughan, Ferri came to Aurora after a long career in marketing, one that was marked by a brief retirement, before she started businesses of her own. There, she became an active member of the city's Chamber of Commerce and soon learned what a Chamber can do for a community like Aurora.

"A friend sent me the [job listing for Aurora Chamber CEO] and said I should apply as it was a perfect fit for me," she said. "She was right. I couldn't have asked for a better job to round out my career."

The foundations of her career were laid by her parents, immigrants from Italy who first came to Canada in 1957 after time living in Switzerland, England and back again, building their family along the way. After nearly seven years in Canada, the family returned to Italy, but they found they no longer really "fit" into their homeland. They returned to Canada six months later, where her mother helped earn money for the family while balancing the roles of wife and mother.

"She was a spectacular seamstress and we were always dressed in the latest fashions," Ferri recalled. "Nothing was too hard. Hot pants, bell bottoms? you name it, she could make it."

This example led Ferri to follow suit to support the family as soon as she could.

When she was 12, she said she lied about her age and got her first summer job at an organization called New Canada "where I taught Italian immigrants the answers to the questions they needed to know to become Canadian citizens."

"Every Wednesday night at the age of 12, I took a streetcar ride from St. Clair and Dufferin to the courthouse at St. Clair and Yonge to translate for the Italians that were applying for citizenship. I spoke perfect Italian after six months in Italy [and] you were allowed to have a translator to pass the test."

Despite this early ingenuity, Ferri's family could only afford to send one of their children to university. This, she said, made her passionate about finding work that offered opportunities to learn and grow.

When she sat down to write last week's keynote address, she said a number of themes emerged as she wove the threads of her life together. These included opportunity, mentorship, relationships and values.

She was able to study marketing at what was then Ryerson University by taking a chance at opportunity at Sears, which supported the continuing education of its employees. She then entered the corporate side of things at Copp Clark. Despite initial misgivings about the opportunity, she went with her gut and accepted the position ? one which kicked off 32 years in publishing.

Mentors along the way, and a return to school to become a coach, were ?transformative? in shaping the way she looked at life and work ?and how to have more deliberate conversations with people.?

?Perhaps because I was at a crossroads in my life, the course totally helped me as I worked through what I wanted from the future,? she said. ?I coached primarily in the business area, coaching executives who were in transition and managers who were in need of support in their career goals.?

And then the Aurora Chamber of Commerce came calling.

?It was an opportunity to use all of my skills and experience to support others,? she said. ?I came in at a time when the Chamber had been struggling and I was up for the challenge, even though I didn't know what I didn't know, because I had never worked in the not-for-profit sector and there are significant differences. I had help from the staff and the Board, but I figured it out. The first thing I did was get out and meet the business owners and find out what it was like to own a business in Aurora. What were their challenges and what could they use help with? I now feel like Aurora is my home; the people here are so welcoming and passionate about their businesses and the Town.

?My first three years were great; the Chamber was growing, we had new initiatives in place for business owners and we were revamping of our signature events. The Chamber was in a good place ? and then COVID hit. Like everyone else, we had to pivot and reinvent ourselves. We worked closely with the Town to provide the support our businesses needed and people called me at night and on weekends to tell me what was going on with their businesses and what they needed. We tried our best to support them in any way possible.?

Giving kudos to then-Board chair Al Wilson for his support during this difficult time, she said she believes the Chamber's collective hard work has been acknowledged by the local business community with rising membership numbers, well-attended and sold-out events, and a local business community that is more connected now than ever before.

?I am incredibly proud of my time at the Chamber and what we have accomplished as a small team,? she concluded. ?I hope that in some small way I was able to emulate my mentors and provide support to others. I realize looking back at my career that my 'why' has always been to be there for people ? for my family, my friends, my work colleagues and our members. At the centre of everything I have done is my desire to make a difference.

?One of the keys to a happy and fulfilling life is to always feel like you're learning something new. Never lose that feeling of amazement when you meet new people or visit new places. One of the things I am looking forward to now that I will have more time is to see the world through the eyes of my grandchildren. There is absolutely nothing better.?

By Brock Weir