

Chamber's Excellence Awards celebrate the best in Aurora's business 'family'?



Aurora's business community came together for an evening of celebration on Thursday night as the Aurora Chamber of Commerce held their annual Business Excellence Awards.

One of the highlights on the local business community's annual calendar, this year's Business Excellence Awards had an extra-special resonance as the Chamber celebrated its 45th anniversary.

The ceremony, which was held at the Royal Venetian Mansion, recognized long-standing and new leaders in the fields of Non-Profits; Community Participation; Manufacturing & Export; IT, Media and Professional Services; and Children, Youth & Education. Additional awards included the Young Entrepreneur Award and the People's Choice Award, the latter of which brought in more than 3,000 online votes.

'This is honestly one of my favourite events of the year - a night where we celebrate what makes Aurora thrive: our incredible business community,' said Mayor Tom Mrakas, who likened this community to a family. 'From our small, family-run shops and our local restaurants that give our downtown its character, to our manufacturers, tech innovators, and professional services that are leading in their fields, you're all building something special right here in Aurora. You're not just creating jobs, you're creating opportunities; you're shaping the kind of Town people want to live in, raise a family in, and invest in. You bring energy, life and purpose to our community and that's something we're celebrating.'

'I often say Aurora's greatest strength is its people and nights like this prove it. When I talk to entrepreneurs looking to set up shop here, they tell me again and again Aurora has something different - a sense of community, collaboration, and pride. And they're right - you've built that reputation. You've made Aurora a place where business owners want to be, not just because it's a great location, but because it's a great community. That's why investment continues to grow here, it's why our downtown is evolving, and it's why more and more people are choosing to live and do business here in Aurora.'

NON-PROFIT OF THE YEAR

CHATS (COMMUNITY & HOME ASSISTANCE TO SENIORS)Aurora Cultural CentreCommunity Living Central YorkWindfall Ecology Centre

The Non-Profit of the Year award recognizes the 'valuable contributions non-profit organizations make to the community of Aurora and recognizes community services and relationships.'

CHATS (Community & Home Assistance to Seniors) took home top honours in this category. In a video shared with the audience, CHATS CEO Christina Bisanz shared the organization took great pride in being nominated.

'CHATS is an organization that serves some 8,000 older adults and their family members in the York Region and South Simcoe,'

she said. "We're actually the largest senior-serving organization throughout the two regions that we're involved with. We're also a multicultural organization, so a number of our programs are offered in culturally specific programs in the language of the individual's origin, and that really helps people to feel safe and able to participate socially with people that they can speak in the same language with, that can share the same cultural foods and cultural activities.

"We have a number of programs that support people to live in their own homes, and in fact, that's the mission of CHATS: to help older adults and their caregivers be able to live in their own homes and communities as long as possible. We try to ensure that our clients are well and safe in their communities so that they can avoid hospitalization and potentially long-term care placement, because we all know that the majority of people want to be able to age in their own homes and age well where they live in their communities."

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION AWARD

NEIGHBOUR MEDIA Aurora Orthodontics Flow Natural Spring Water NewRoads Automotive Group

Neighbour Media took home top honours in the Community Participation Category, which recognizes a "business or an employee that shows strong commitment to giving back through participation in business, community organizations, and/or charitable events."

"Neighbour Media was founded on community. It was our priority to ensure that all the amazing people, organizations and events were highlighted in the spotlight," said Neighbour Media founder Lynette Lanning in her video message.

Accepting the award was Neighbour's Myles Doak who reiterated community participation "is at the core" of what they do.

"We love being involved in the community, working with charities, businesses, the municipality, the Chamber, everyone," he said. "Myself personally, this business has really changed my perspective of getting involved in the community, whether you're volunteering or going to events, raising money. So, thank you so much for the award, and we'll continue to see you around the neighborhood."

LEADER IN MANUFACTURING EXPORT

CLEAN RIVER RECYCLING SOLUTIONS Treasure Mills School Safe Snack Company

Clean River Recycling Solutions was the winner in this category, where they were recognized for their innovative products designed to make recycling as easy and efficient as possible.

"A few things that set us apart that differentiates us from our competition is our bins are designed to be future-ready," said Clean River CEO Hugh Caines in his nomination video. "The other thing that sets us apart is about 35 years of experience. We work with clients to understand what problems we are trying to solve."

Accepting the honour on stage, he added that the award belongs to the entire Clean River team.

"Our mission is to make the planet a better place and we do that one recycling bin at a time," he said, noting that in the current business climate it's especially rewarding to accept an honour recognizing exports. "We ship product all over North America and the world, but our roots are right here in Aurora. We're proud to say we've been in Aurora all these years. We're committed to the community for what it does and the support it gives us."

I.T. & MEDIA PROFESSIONAL SERVICES

FLAGSHIP SOFTWARE LTD. Addison Marketing Solutions Foundation BTS Business Technology Solutions Neighbour Media

This award, which recognized Flagship Software, a local company celebrating its own milestone this year honours professional services providers specifically in the fields of I.T., marketing, digital support services, website design, graphic design, and video production that exhibit extraordinary professional services and support to the community and the business community itself.

"This is our 30th anniversary," said Flagship General Manager Kristi Kanitz of the Vata Court-based business in their video. "This [nomination] is pretty exciting for us. Usually, we're in the background doing our custom development behind other companies. We're known for the problem-solving that we do with software development. We're known for customer service, but usually just among our customers and in our industry, so it's really nice to be recognized outside of that."

Accepting the award on stage, she added: "We love being in Aurora. We love being part of the Chamber. I have to say that this has been the most welcoming community. We moved here in 2020 [from Richmond Hill] and one of the reasons we moved to Aurora was so I could join the Chamber."

YOUNG ENTREPRENEUR AWARD

RISE EVENT PLANNING ? JULIA LIVIA AND SAMANTHA KOSTOPOULOS Key Advantage Team ? Lindsay Strom Socials & Stilettos ? Brittney Jones Studio 95 Training & Athletics ? Yehya Chehade

Recognizing entrepreneurs under the age of 40, this year's Young Entrepreneur Award went to Julia Livia and Samantha Kostopoulos, founders of Rise Event Planning.

Rise Event Planning was established by its founders ? high school friends ? in 2018 when they were just 22.

"We focus on delivering five-star experiences?from brand experiences to corporate retreats, as well as weddings to showers. We curate unforgettable experiences that guests will remember for years to come," they said. "We were two high school friends with a dream, and now that dream has turned into a successful, thriving business and we now have a team of six."

"It's not easy starting a business at 22, but it's also not easy doing an event planning business through COVID. We're very proud of what we've done, our team behind us, and our family who supports us."

CHILDREN & YOUTH RECREATION & EDUCATION

STEM MINDS Aurora Family Martial Arts Aurora Music Academy Socialskilled

This year's Children & Youth Recreation & Education Award went to STEM Minds, an Aurora-based company that not only serves students between the ages of four and high school in the fields of STEM ? Science, Technology, Engineering and Math ? but has recently branched out to show students how to apply these learnings in diverse fields, including agriculture.

"At STEM Minds, our mission has always been to empower youth through education that inspires creativity, critical thinking, and confidence ? preparing the next generation [with] skills to not only adapt to the future but to shape it," they said. "This award is a reflection of the dedication of our educators and the parents, the curiosity of the students, and the unwavering support of our community here in Aurora."

"Together we have built a space where innovation and imagination can thrive. We are deeply grateful to the Aurora Chamber of Commerce for this recognition. And to all of our parents?and the families who believe in what we have done and what we do, their trust truly continues to inspire us and help us to reach higher and dream bigger?. This award is for every student who we have met, for every parent who has supported us, to every robot that we have in our STEM education, for every coding program that we have written and that we have made available to the students to inspire them to go farther."

PEOPLE'S CHOICE AWARD

AIZAD FOODAllegra MarketingChocolate & CompanyFlow Mineral Spring WaterLD Human ResourcesMaverikMidasMonaco InteriorsMondo Del CaféNeighbour MediaOmars ShoesRosegold HealthSunrise Senior LivingThe Aurora Skin ClinicThrive Gymnastics

The People's Choice Award is presented to an Aurora-based business in any industry that ?exemplifies excellence in the following: outstanding customer experience; commitment to the community; positive impact and connection; and accessibility and inclusivity.?

This year the people chose Aizadfood, a company specializing in a diverse array of dried fruits and spices, that prides itself with the philosophy "that food is not just about nourishing the body, but also the soul" with an eye of promoting sustainability to minimize their environmental impact.

?Thank you to all supporters, customers, and thank you from the bottom of my heart,? they said.

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter