

Charities sing everything but the blues at Winter Blues Fest



By Brock Weir

Blue Door Shelters and Community and Home Assistance to Seniors (CHATS) are basking in a blue glow this week as chief beneficiaries of last week's third annual Aurora Winter Blues Festival.

The event, which was held Thursday night at the Aurora Cultural Centre, followed by two days of blowing the roof off Theatre Aurora on Henderson Drive, uses the first night kickoff - the Festival's inaugural 'Blues Bash' not only to highlight the two local causes, but also showcase the musicians of tomorrow.

The Aurora Winter Blues Festival started in the humble beginnings of a yearly house party hosted by Aurora couple Jamie Macdonald and Helen Gushue. With well over 100 people filling their home, they decided to branch out to Theatre Aurora and the growth has only continued.

'It is only natural that after the house party, we kind of throw it out there and give it back to the community and now it has turned into a three night event,' said Mr. Macdonald, addressing a sold out crowd at the Cultural Centre. 'It is just growing and we're getting big support from the local community.'

'[The Blues Bash] gives us a throwback to the origins of our 'Gushmac Blues Fest.' Stevie Ray Vaughan had a saying that if the house is rockin', don't bother knockin' and that is what this is all about.'

With their share of Blues Fest proceeds, Blue Door Shelters is going to be able to open up their doors more often when people in need come knockin'. In shelters throughout York Region, Blue Doors operates 29 shelter beds for men, 15 for families, and 14 are for youth. According to Blue Doors' Kevin Kennedy, they have to turn hundreds of people away on a weekly basis simply due to lack of resources.

'25 years ago when I started working at Porter Place Men's Shelter in Newmarket, I was shocked to know [it was there],' said Mr. Kennedy. 'I grew up in Newmarket, played ball in Town Park when I was a kid, and I was shocked to learn that there were people here in York Region who were homeless. When I started there in 1989, I learned just how many people we have in the lower half of our socio-economic ladder here that wind up homeless.'

?Since I started, we opened up a family shelter and a youth shelter and I am sorry to say the problem hasn't gone away. Unfortunately, it has gotten a lot worse. [Our beds] are full to overflowing every night of the year and sadly we have to turn away well into the hundreds on a weekly basis. People who have grown up and live in York Region, one of the most affluent Regions in the country, don't have a place to stay. That to this day still shocks me.?

Homeless people, he added, often think the world has forgotten them. By the time they knock on their blue door, they have usually exhausted their own support networks and run out of places to go and they end up on the streets thinking nobody cares. Events such as the Blues Bash, he said, lay this myth to rest.

?Events like this remind clients there are people in their community who are doing things to show they care about them. We remind them they are not forgotten and I can't tell you how far that goes to help the people we work with just to know that people still care.?

People often forget about the needs of seniors in the community as well, added CHATS CEO Christina Bisanz.

?People have given so much to their community and country over the years, but quite frankly, they have come to a point where living on their own, or with increasingly more complex medical conditions makes it difficult for them to remain in their own homes and live independently with dignity,? she said, underscoring the importance of CHATS transportation program, which provides over 76,000 rides annually to 4,000 seniors throughout York Region.

?There are challenges that come with aging and challenges for people with parents who are aging so you have your own lives and families to care for, but what happens if mum falls and breaks a hip? What happens if dad starts to show signs of dementia and can't cope as well and suddenly your life becomes uprooted and challenged to? That is where CHATS can come in. [Programs ensure] no elderly person in our community is left behind without the kind of care they need.?