

Citizen of the Year "wears Aurora on his sleeve"



By Brock Weir

Surrounded by family and friends, Auroran founder Ron Wallace was honoured as Aurora's Citizen of the Year in a ceremony last week.

Hailing Mr. Wallace during last Tuesday's Council meeting for his service to the community, Mayor Geoffrey Dawe made the presentation.

Mr. Wallace, known in many quarters as 'Mr. Aurora' for his dedication to the community, was saluted for his three terms on Aurora Council, serving as York Region District School Board Trustee, a volunteer firefighter, and director of the Aurora Historical Society, Aurora Chamber of Commerce, and Aurora Cemetery Board.

His work as a Rotarian, support for the Aurora Optimist Club, Lions' Club, Royal Canadian Legion, Society of York Region Artists (SOYRA), the Aurora Farmers' Market, and driving force behind the Aurora Street Festival were just a handful of his many accomplishments highlighted by the Mayor.

'He is a stranger to very few,' said Mayor Dawe. 'He has been an exceptionally visible and active member of our community. He came to Aurora in 1969 to work in the newspaper industry. His community involvement speaks volumes for his character and his commitment to our Town. He was a Rotarian for many years and recipient of the Paul Harris Award for Rotary International, which is a very prestigious award.'

'In addition to the honour from Rotarians, our Citizen of the Year was recognized by the Aurora Heritage Advisory Committee in 2007 for the promotion of Aurora's Heritage. He was honoured by SOYRA in 2008, by the Ontario Heritage Trust in 2011 and was a recent recipient of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee medal. With a wealth of accolades and a lifetime commitment to his community, our Citizen of the Year's altruism can be summed up best by his own words: 'I love Aurora and that's all there is to it. I would do anything I could for this Town.'

'Choosing one person as a glowing example of civic pride and a commitment to helping our community can be a difficult task, but when faced with an individual for whom giving back is a lifelong pursuit, the burden of decision-making is much easier.'

Receiving an extended ovation from Councillors and the audience in the Council chamber, an emotional Mr. Wallace was a man of few words. He told *The Auroran* a few days after letting his recognition sink in, that he was very pleased. It's a welcome bit of news after a recent hospital stint, during which time 2012's Citizen of the Year came to visit him.

'Brian North came up to see me in the hospital and he knew about it at the time, but I didn't know anything about it!' says Mr. Wallace. 'I was asking him questions like, 'So, what is it like to be the Citizen of the Year?' not having any idea I was going to get it!'

Ron added that not only was it an honour to be named Citizen of the Year, but in 2013 as Aurora celebrates its 150th anniversary.

'It was probably Dick Illingworth who called me by name [at a Council meeting], instead of 'Hey, you with the pencil!'

 Ron says of his first positive impression of Aurora, the first seed of a love affair which grew over time, even naming his daughter Aurora, now an associate professor at NYU, in its honour. 'I wore Aurora on my sleeve, that's for sure.'

Ron started out his career as an office boy at The Toronto Star, but after bouncing to the Canadian Press, and other stints, a chance letter back home which wound up in their local paper gave him a taste for bylines.

He then had a five year term at the Stouffville Tribune, followed by a time studying journalism at Ryerson University, and eventually becoming editor of the Aurora Banner and the Etobicoke Guardian.

Amongst his personal favourite projects were Operation Puckshy, which he founded to install protective glass at the Aurora Community Centre after one spectator was hit in the face by a puck, and duties with the Rotary Club of Aurora, which he took over from his late partner, Rosemary Schumaker.

Sitting alongside him in the Council chamber as he accepted his reward was his wife, Patricia. Having 'coerced' him (his word!) into attending the meeting, she had nothing but pride as it unfolded.

'I am so happy for him and obviously very, very proud to be married to him and a part of his life,' she says, before adding with a laugh, 'It's about time! I think it is well deserved and I am thrilled for him.'

Others in the community also offered their tributes to Aurora's Citizen of the Year, including Councillor Chris Ballard, who received from Ron his 'first paying job in journalism.' Councillor Ballard was then a resident of King City and says Mr. Wallace didn't hesitate to throw him into the deep end.

'On my first day, he had me write an in-depth article on the school board's proposed budget,' Councillor Ballard recalls. 'I thought he was crazy. What did I know about million dollar financing? He thought otherwise and told me to get my 'g-d ass out the door.'

While he cites then-trustee and former Aurora Councillor Norm Weller for helping to get through it, he also recalled days when people in the community would drop by the office just to check in with Ron and 'share gossip.'

'He had his finger on the pulse of Aurora and our office at Yonge and Wellington was a perfect location to watch the action. Ron could be grumpy ' or at least he tried. He, rightly, criticized my spelling, made caustic comments about stories not up to snuff. He always had a lead on a good story, and he was a decent boss and a good guy.

'Ron reinforced in me the importance of community journalism. He showed it was both a satisfying and noble profession that could make a difference in people's lives.'

Councillor Wendy Gaertner adds her appreciation for Ron's support of Hot Spot, a youth drop-in she ran for many years for kids aged 11 ' 14.

'For 18 years he was instrumental in keeping the community updated about our activities,' she says. 'I believe he really understood youth need a place just for them, where they feel welcome and respected. Ron, on behalf of all the kids who loved those Friday evenings, congratulations on being named Aurora's 2013 Citizen of the Year.'