

## Community Recognition Awards honour 'constellation of stars' that keep Aurora bright



There are many stars in the night sky that often go unseen, but together they form the constellations that have a profound impact on human culture.

While they don't do it for the applause, the tireless work of our local volunteers can similarly go unheralded, but that was not the case on Monday night where these community stars found their place in the spotlight, even if reluctantly, as the Town of Aurora hosted the 2025 Community Recognition Awards.

Those honoured on May 26 represented hundreds of collective years of community dedication and giving back.

'We are so fortunate to live in a community where generosity is not an exception, but a way of life,' said Mayor Tom Mrakas, who served as the evening's emcee. 'Aurora is stronger, more compassionate and more vibrant because of the countless contributions of people like you, our volunteers.'

'Whether you mentor youth, support charitable causes, coach sport teams, coordinate cultural programs, or lend a helping hand to those in need, your impact resonates far beyond what is seen. You help shape lives and build community in a way that is both profound and lasting.'

Hailing the evening's recipients as Aurora's 'brightest stars,' Mayor Mrakas threaded the constellation metaphor.

'You may not always see them in the daylight, and sometimes their presence is quiet or subtle - but when we pause to look up, when we truly take time to notice, we realize that they've been guiding us all along,' he said. 'Constellations are made up of individual stars, each with their own unique brilliance. Yet, together, they form patterns that have guided explorers, inspired storytellers and connected generations across time.'

'In the same way, each of you brings your own light - your time, talent, energy, and heart - and when combined with others, you form the guiding patterns of our community. You offer hope, direction, and a sense of belonging. You help people find their way, often without even realizing it. Just like those stars in the night sky, many of your efforts go unseen by the wider world. But the people you've helped - they see you. They feel your impact.'

### ARTS & CULTURE AWARD SHADOWPATH THEATRE PRODUCTIONS

The Arts and Culture Award is presented each year to an individual or group that has enhanced the community through their support or promotion of culture, music, visual, performing or the literary arts. 'Shadowpath Theatre has enriched Aurora's cultural scene by

creating unique site-specific performances in unexpected locations,? reads their citation. ?From heritage homes, parks and cafes they have brought arts to the community and to life. They have a long history of partnering with local venues and artists, making theatre accessible and engaging for diverse audiences.

?Shadowpath is also a strong supporter of the local arts economy and champions female leadership within the industry. The impact of their innovative approach to storytelling and community engagement has been felt throughout Aurora.?

#### COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP AWARDLAUREN HANNA

Presented each year to an individual or organization that has ?significantly enhanced the Town through their contribution, commitment and leadership in the areas of charitable giving, civic engagement, community events or community spirit,? this year's recipient, Lauren Hanna, was described as a ?dynamic community leader? in many ways. ?She is the driving force behind popular community events such as the Easter Egg Hunt she designed for her local park, and the Cousins Street Party which brings neighbours together and has been a dedicated advocate for improvements to public spaces like Town Park. Her active participation in civic organizations such as the Aurora Public Library Board, [Ratepayers Associations] and her ability to inspire collective action have made a significant positive impact on the [our] community. Lauren makes everyone feel welcomed wherever she is. Lauren leads not just with vision, but with heart. Whether rolling up her sleeves at local events or rallying others with words of encouragement, she inspires action, fosters connections and turns ideas into impact. Her passion is contagious, and her dedication is unwavering, making her a community leader and cheerleader in equal measure.?

#### GOOD BUSINESS AWARDNEIGHBOUR MEDIA

Each year, the Town honours a business that has shown its commitment to corporate responsibility and corporate involvement ?through its ongoing support of charitable causes, events and programs.? Neighbour Media was celebrated in its citation for its ?remarkable commitment to supporting local charities and businesses by providing extensive coverage and promotional opportunities? across their platforms. ?By attending countless local events and sharing the stories of our residents and organizations, Neighbour Media fosters a strong sense of connection and awareness throughout Aurora.?

#### GOOD NEIGHBOUR AWARDJIM JACKSON

Jim Jackson is the recipient of this year's Good Neighbour Award, which recognizes those who ?embody what it means to be a good neighbour [in] the simple acts of kindness and compassion that helps create connected and vibrant neighbourhoods.? Jackson was hailed as an ?all-encompassing good neighbour? in his community who goes above and beyond to assist those around him. ?He's the kind of neighbour who doesn't wait to be asked; he sees a storefront buried in snow and grabs a shovel without hesitation. He welcomes everyone with a smile that says, 'You belong here.' Whether it's lending a hand, offering a kind word, or quietly stepping in when someone needs support, Jim does it all without expecting recognition. He reminds us all that small, everyday acts of kindness are the foundation of a great community. His selfless actions, and support, create a stronger and more connected neighbourhood. Jim's genuine kindness and unwavering willingness to contribute make him a cherished presence in our community.?

GREEN AWARDSTEM MINDSPresented each year to an individual or group that supports the protection, preservation, sustainability or conservation of the natural environment, this year's honouree, STEM Minds, was celebrated for its efforts towards a sustainable future. ?They are not just teaching sustainability, they are inspiring a mindset shift where innovation and environmental stewardship go hand in hand. By sparking curiosity, they empower young people with the knowledge and skills to understand and address environmental challenges through hands-on projects focused on AgriTech and sustainable practices. Their commitment to using eco-friendly materials and engaging the community in green initiatives is fostering a generation of environmentally conscious leaders. Their dedication to a greener Aurora makes them an outstanding recipient of the Green Award.?

#### INCLUSIVITY AWARDALISON HUGHES

Alison Hughes, an advocate for making Aurora a more accessible and inclusive community for all, is this year's recipient of the Inclusivity Award. Alison Hughes has been a tireless champion for accessibility and inclusion in Aurora, demonstrating exceptional leadership and dedication. Her efforts are creating not just physical spaces that are accessible, but a cultural shift toward equity and empathy that will benefit generations to come. Alison's voice is a guiding light in the conversation around inclusion, a voice that challenges assumptions, champions [change] and invites others to think differently. Her courage to speak up, paired with her determination to drive change, has opened doors both literally and figuratively for so many in our Town. Her advocacy was instrumental in bringing a fully accessible and barrier-free playground to Town Park, setting a new standard for inclusivity in our public spaces. Through sharing her lived experiences and her active role on the Accessibility Advisory Committee, Alison is fostering greater understanding and ensuring that accessibility remains a key priority in our Town. Alison's work is a testament to how one person's dedication can influence policy, reshape spaces and build a more welcoming community for all.

#### **OLDER ADULT VOLUNTEER AWARD GLEN SHARP**

Honouring residents 55+ who make significant contributions to community volunteerism, this year's recipient, Glen Sharp, was recognized for his work in many areas, including the Aurora Seniors' Centre where he currently serves as president and an advocate for older adults. His leadership on various committees encourages engagement and forward-thinking initiatives which benefit seniors in our community. Glen's dedication extends beyond the Seniors' Centre through his long-standing involvement with the Aurora Optimist Club and Aurora Minor Hockey Association, to name a few. He inspires others to get involved and give back.

#### **YOUTH VOLUNTEER AWARD ANGELA FANG, HAILEY GRAHAM, NAYA MUELLER**

For the first time, the Youth Volunteer Award was bestowed to three exceptional student leaders.

**ANGELA FANG:** Angela has made a significant impact on the Aurora Cultural Centre through her dedicated involvement over the past three years. As a youth member of the Outreach Committee, she has provided invaluable insights that have shaped youth engagement strategies and the successful Youth Artists on the Rise program. Angela just doesn't show up, she steps up demonstrating that age is not a barrier to making an impact. Her leadership and commitment have fostered a vibrant and inclusive environment for young artists in our community.

**HAILEY GRAHAM:** Throughout her high school journey, Hailey has demonstrated exceptional leadership and a deep commitment to creating inclusive communities. From organizing impactful school-wide events to contributing to the York Region District School Board's mental health initiatives and supporting global causes, her passion for making a difference is evident. Hailey's passion ignites possibility in others, empowering fellow youth to use their voices, take action, and shape the future of their community. She is driven by purpose, and not driven by recognition, but [by] a desire to make things better, kinder and more connected for everyone around her. Hailey's dedication to uplifting others and fostering a sense of belonging has positively impacted countless individuals.

**NAYA MUELLER:** In a short time since moving to Aurora, Naya has become an incredibly engaged and impactful youth volunteer. Naya's contributions have rippled outward, touching lives, and reminding us that youth leadership isn't the future, it's here now. Her leadership style has been a force for good, turning compassion into action and transforming ordinary moments into meaningful change. Her involvement spans mentorship, student government, arts, environmental initiatives, community safety programs, and the Town's Youth Engagement Committee. Naya's diverse contributions and her passion for creating a welcoming and inclusive community make her an exemplary young leader.

**By Brock Weir**