

Founding leaders honoured as Cultural Centre marks 15th anniversary



A couple of card tables and a handful or two of fold-up chairs was all that was needed to lay the foundations of a community success story ? that, and a passion for art and artists close to home.

On Friday, at Aurora Town Square, those who took their places at those rickety card tables came back together to celebrate the 15th anniversary of the Aurora Cultural Centre.

The January 17 anniversary celebration coincided with the latest in the Centre's Great Artists Music Series, a performance by the Campbell, Fagan and Park Trio, a popular program lovingly curated by Aurora-based classical music producers Norbert and Bonnie Kraft.

Ahead of the performance, the Centre marked its milestone by re-dedicating its showpiece C7 Yamaha Piano as the ?Kraft Concert Piano,? in honour of the couple who has been with the Centre from its start ? and who took a key role in fundraising for its acquisition and supporting its maintenance since it was first wheeled into the building.

First to accept the honour was Bonnie, who was on the Cultural Centre's founding Board more than a decade-and-a-half ago.

?What we had 15 years ago were 10 fold-up chairs and a couple of card tables and, from that, and the dreams of the hard-work and the vision and passion of so many people, and the ongoing support of the Town, and just talented folks who wanted to come on Board ? from that, it's just awesome to see what has happened and the growth,? said Bonnie. ?I'm sort of awestruck that this has come together today. Thank you so much for this honour.?

The success of the Aurora Cultural Centre was underscored by a number of dignitaries in attendance on January 17, including MPPs Dawn Gallagher Murphy (Newmarket-Aurora) and Michael Parsa (Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill), and Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese, who was representing Council in the absence of Mayor Tom Mrakas, who experienced a bereavement in his family. Also in attendance were former mayors Geoff Dawe and Phyllis Morris, former councillor Chris Ballard, Cultural Centre founding Executive Director Laura Schembri, and Jane Taylor, the Centre's Communications Manager, who has been with the organization since its inception.

?Thank you, Laura, for building such a strong foundation on which to build,? said Cultural Centre Executive Director Suzanne Haines. ?Since 2010, the organization has served almost 500,000 people through our programs with 281 performances, 951 education classes and camps, 106 gallery exhibits, and have built a volunteer program that has brought almost 40,000 hours of service to community and growing. The growth from that small organization so many years ago to where we are now is indeed

something to celebrate and I am so proud to be part of this partnership and all it has accomplished.?

Speaking to the organization's history, Councillor Weese said the Centre was born out of a call from the Town ?to build an organization that would be arm's length to govern and run the Cultural Centre.

?The Cultural Committee went to work and was charged with building what would become a not-for-profit incorporated into a charity called the Aurora Cultural Centre. I want to thank that initial group and everyone who has had any part and any position in making this organization successful for the last 15 years,? he said. ?It is a feat to launch something that is sustainable and successful of any size and those visionaries did it. Thank you to everyone who had a part in allowing us to be here 15 years later.

?As we acknowledge the past, we should also look to the future. Aurora now has this beautiful facility that is an integral part of the revitalization of our Downtown and I know the [Aurora Cultural Centre] is up to that challenge. Within it, the new governance model that has been identified by the Town as a strong and meaningful relationship with the Cultural Centre [providing] the cultural services that are well within their skills as well as the expertise, as shown by the success of everything they have done over the last number of years. This high-integrity organization has shown year after year that they are up to the task. I am looking forward to activation and animation. There is a lot of creativity in your organization, I just can't wait to see it happen at every turn.?

In his remarks, MPP Parsa highlighted arts and culture as a unifier.

?You have not only helped local artists, but you've helped all of us come together to celebrate them. Nothing brings people together better than arts and culture and I know most of you, if not all of you, agree to that,? he said. ?We need to make sure that places like the Aurora Cultural Centre continue to thrive, to be there for us, for the future of artists so that we can continue to come together. At a time when there is so much division and divisiveness, this is one area that brings all of us together.?

Added MPP Gallagher Murphy: ?Imagine 15 years the Aurora Cultural Centre has been the cornerstone of creativity in this community ? from inspiring visual arts to world-class performances like the Great Artist series. The Centre has enriched our lives and fostered a deep sense of connection. Your dedication to inclusivity, accessibility, and supporting the arts for all ages has made this centre a place where everyone can feel inspired and valued.?

By Brock Weir