

Ignoring her own advice is way of life for volunteer



By Brock Weir

Say no to yes.

It's a philosophy that once guided Nancy Black, so much so that it's emblazoned and immortalized just below her right wrist.

So many of the small, postage stamp-sized tattoos on Ms. Black's forearms have a special meaning for her, but this one is something different. It's a symbol of the fact that sometimes you have to ignore your own advice.

Ms. Black was one of 15 York Region residents and organizations honoured this month as recipients of the Portraits of Giving exhibition, which opened at Newmarket's Pfaff Automotive.

Now in its ninth year, this year's program, which is spearheaded by photographer Karen Merk, added two categories this year: Life Time Giver, which went to former Newmarket mayor Tom Taylor, and Sports, for which Ms. Black was the inaugural honouree.

Ms. Merk founded Portraits of Giving to showcase people among us who give back tirelessly to their communities, with each honouree photographed in a place within York Region that has special meaning for the work they do.

Ms. Black is pictured at the Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex where she coaches Aurora's Special Ducks, a local swim club for athletes with intellectual disabilities.

“Nancy Black is founder of the Special Olympics swimming team in Aurora, which led to the formation of the official local chapter, Special Olympics Ontario ? Aurora,” reads the citation for Ms. Black, whose induction into the Portraits of Giving Wall of Fame was sponsored by Apple Self Storage. “The organization is celebrating its 10th anniversary and has grown to include a total of seven sports serving over 120 athletes. Nancy has held various positions and is currently Head Coach of the Special Ducks, back where she began in 2008. Her motto is ‘Just Say Yes’ and she believes that saying ‘Yes’ opens doors and opportunities, especially by volunteering.”

So, about that tattoo? No regrets.

“Three years ago, I had this tattooed because I was feeling, ‘I’ll just keep doing it, work stuff, volunteer stuff,’ and that’s my thing,” she says about feeling a bit of burnout. “But, saying yes has opened up doors to numerous wonderful opportunities, people, things and experiences. It is just in my nature to say, ‘Sure, why not?’”

Ms. Black tells The Auroran she was first inspired to give back by her mother. After her father died, Nancy was raised by a single mom who “did all kinds of things” in the community, a fact which did not go unnoticed by her young daughter.

“It certainly means a lot to be recognized,” she says, thinking about how the Special Ducks began. “We were a group of adults who wanted to give back to the community, giving back to Big Brothers, Big Sisters, the Heart & Stroke Foundation, but we just wanted to pick one entity, and [wondered] how we could help people with special needs.

“One of our coaches at the time did have some knowledge about coaching swimming for people with special needs. Being recognized now is symbolic because we’re at 10 years now as an official association with Special Olympics. We just wanted to give back, but had no idea where we would end up!”

Given that anniversary, it is fitting that Ms. Black was so honoured in 2018. The timing was also fitting for Aurora siblings Ian and

Rod Johnson of Johnson Financial Group, who were honoured by the Aurora Chamber of Commerce for their philanthropic activities.

The Portraits of Giving launch coincided with the fourth anniversary of the fire which devastated Aurora United Church and Rod, as Chair of the Church Council until his term ended in February, has been instrumental in the rebuild process.

‘The fire was pretty defining in terms of time and energy from myself in the last four years,’ says Rod. ‘You have no idea where your contributions might fall if you follow your interests. That has been a big interest to the community as we look forward to rebuilding.’

Finding opportunities to contribute by following your passions is a philosophy Ian shares as well.

‘We have always felt pretty passionate about Aurora and the community, so we just knew it was a great way to get involved with the community, find out what’s going on and figure out where you can best plug yourself in to help out,’ says Ian. ‘One of the things that is really important is you make it part of your ongoing lifestyle in terms of working in the community. It is not helpful to just get involved with something and stop.’

‘You have to pace yourself so you can continue being involved with things. That takes a little bit of balance. You try and figure out every year what are some of the things we can get involved with. You go with the flow, find areas where you can plug yourself in and we’re always looking for something new.’

Joining Mr. Taylor, Messrs. Johnson and Ms. Black in Portraits of Giving’s Class of 2018 are Kirk Bowden (Newmarket), Jason Kaptyn (Richmond Hill), Robin Priestly (King Chamber of Commerce), Glenn D. Crosby (Markham), Rossana Magnotta (Vaughan), Gail Lenters (Georgina), Todd and Marcia Finlayson (Stouffville), The Franklin Club (East Gwillimbury Chamber of Commerce), Superintendent Fred Moffatt (York Regional Police), King City Fire Chief Jim Wall (York Region Fire Services) and Iman Tajadod (SMAI Young Adult).

‘Giving back is what we do here in York Region,’ said Ms. Merk. ‘It is who we are and what we believe in. We’re very pleased to see the impact of our efforts to bring awareness and share knowledge about social responsibility over the past nine years.’