

Martha's Table founder fed the community



By Brock Weir

Helen Dawn is being remembered for her selfless giving, which resulted in thousands of Aurorans over the last 14 years finding food and fellowship when they needed it most.

Ms. Dawn, who founded Martha's Table, a weekly meal program for community members in need, died August 19 at the age of 84. Week in and year out, bar for a brief summer hiatus, Martha's Table welcomes everyone for a simple meal of a soup, sandwich and a sweet. It's a simple formula, but one that has warmed the stomachs and hearts of local families young and old.

Initially an independent program of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, of which Ms. Dawn was a life-long member, it continues in full operation out of St. Andrew's Hall, but now under the umbrella of Welcoming Arms' Bridging the Gap program.

?We thought maybe we could start something here,? Ms. Dawn told The Auroran in 2014, when Martha's Table was entering its tenth season. ?We opened up the first day with no publicity or anything and we had 15 people here. Everything was fine. 15 or 20 people could be good, we thought, but the next week we had 45! After that, [our numbers grew] because word had gotten around the community.?

Since those early days, Martha's Table has remained a destination. Thursday mornings on Victoria Street are characterised by heavy on-street parking as a steady stream of people flow into the church hall looking for fresh food and friendship.

?Our original philosophy was we just wanted to feed the community who needed something to eat,? said Ms. Dawn. ?If you are hungry, you don't live well. If you don't live well, you don't add to the community. If we can feed you, then you'll add to this community of Aurora.

?[Over the years] it has gotten better because now there are more people interacting. We have people with whom we send food down at the end of the day. We will send food home with people who are really in need, which might be three or four days' worth of food so they can survive. A lot of them are seniors. The pension doesn't go as far as you think it does, especially if you are a single person. That is just where it is at ? we want to feed people.?

Many people who saw Ms. Dawn in action are paying tribute to the impact she had both within the St. Andrew's community and Aurora as a whole.

?If you saw her at Martha's Table, that was her essence in anything she undertook,? says long-time friend Anne Neuman. ?She was always out to greet the people, wanted to sit down and eat her meal with the masses, she didn't sit with her own group. She intermixed with them because at Martha's we often get a number of people who are also clients of Bridging the Gap. She was always very cognizant. She could pick them out very quickly and sit down and talk with them so they wouldn't eat a meal alone and have somebody to talk to.

?She was down to earth and not highfalutin with big ideas with what Martha's Table could do. She wanted decent soups, she wanted sandwiches and then some sweets with tea and coffee.?

Similar sentiments were shared by Beverley Wood, a founding member of Welcoming Arms:

?She was a lovely, caring, compassionate person who felt very strongly about making a contribution to the community,? said Ms.

Wood. ?I think that is one of the driving forces for her to have started Martha's Table.?

Adds friend Carol Runstedler: ?I don't really know what drove Helen, but a Christian inside and out. We call her St. Helen.?

Ms. Dawn, who was predeceased by her husband Robert, known as Jerry, is survived by her children Diane, Murray, Richard, Laura, and Ann, eleven grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren.

In lieu of flowers, the family has requested donations to Ross Memorial Hospital or the Stronach Regional Cancer Centre.