

MP recognizes 30 residents with King Charles III Coronation Medals



Thirty residents from the riding of Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill received King Charles III Coronation Medals in a ceremony hosted by MP Leah Taylor Roy at The Armoury on Sunday afternoon.

The recipients, who were honored for their distinguished service to community, reflected the diverse and multicultural nature of Canadian society. The celebration at the Town Park-adjacent events centre felt like a tonic for these tempestuous, divisive times.

MP Taylor Roy's appearance on stage as the event's keynote speaker elicited hearty applause from attendees and she expressed her appreciation for the positive energy in the room and how so many have contributed to our country and community.?

In her pitch for national unity in these trying times, Taylor Roy acknowledged that ?We are a proud and free country? which revved up the crowd that reflected the growing Canadian consciousness about presenting a united front against Trump's annexation threats and tariffs.

Taylor Roy also pointed to the importance of a free press in Canada and noted specifically that ?Local Canadian media have never been more important in an era of social media disinformation. These are people that we can trust.?

After thanking the community reporters and photographers in attendance, Roy expressed her admiration for ?the selfless service demonstrated by today's recipients? and added that ?politics is just about people?for example, the people in this room that have served other people in their communities. Their stories that you'll hear today are inspirational.?

One of those inspirational leaders recognized on Sunday afternoon was long-time Auroran editor Brock Weir. Emcee John Green described Weir's transformation of a community newspaper into ?a vehicle for change and a forum for Aurora's diverse perspectives.? Green added that Weir ?has used local journalism to amplify local initiatives, empower all voices, and foster a sense of community and engagement within Aurora.?

Weir, who has worked for 15 years as a reporter, and later editor of The Auroran noted that the best part of the event was ?seeing the myriad ways that people have given back to community.?

?I'm proud to be part of it. With the paper, I've been able to interview so many of the recipients [recognized today] and now I can celebrate with them and their families.?

Weir also praised the event's ?non-partisan recognition of recipients.?

?It really drives home the value of community and when I see so many people here engaged in diversity, equity, inclusivity, and environmental initiatives, it shows the strength of Canada.?

Twenty-nine other recipients revealed the strength of Canada as noted by Weir.

Green introduced each of the winners and summarized their distinguished level of community service:

Giovanni Battaglini

A dedicated community leader who has operated multiple successful small businesses for fifty years in Richmond Hill and built a legacy of commitment to arts, culture, and sports by opening his home to international students, sponsoring sports teams, raising money for the arts, and preserving Italian heritage, promoting and supporting cultural organizations, and empowering youth;

Glemena Bettencourt

A leader in local fundraising for over four decades--raising over \$1 million for the Richmond Hill-Oak Ridges Terry Fox Run and collecting donations for cancer research with Fox himself in 1980?leading the annual Oak Ridges Toy Drive and volunteering for Habitat for Humanity projects and international sporting events;

Sean Cisterna

A board member of the York Region Arts Council and an award-winning film director whose Mythic Productions company prioritizes hiring local talent, crew members, and musicians to represent Canada through storytelling, including his recent theatrical documentary Silver Screamer's?a unique story about aging and creativity;

Paolo Da Silva

The Deputy Chief of the York Region Police has been dedicated to community service over his distinguished thirty-year career in law enforcement, including being co-chair for United Way York Region, Chair of the ?Be a Hero? Campaign, and raising \$5,500 in 2023 for the Southlake Foundation to help the hospital expand its paediatric oncology care in the Be a Hero Head Shave event;

Razak Damani

The former president of the Islamic Shia Ithna Asheri Jamaat of Toronto played a pivotal role in constructing a new multipurpose community centre and mosque, raising \$500,000 for Rohingya Muslims, serving as president of NASIMCO to support community development and international relief work, and contributing to the resettlement of Syrian and Yemeni refugees;

Paolo D'Elia

A philanthropist and business leader who raised over \$1 million for women's cancer research through initiatives like ?Colour Your Hair to Conquer Cancer?, served as Honorary Chair of the Princess Margaret Hospital Foundation, founded the D'Elia Robotic Surgery and Research Fund to raise \$100,000 annually for genitourinary cancer patients, and donated \$1.5 million worth of beauty products for women's shelters and Ukrainian relief efforts;

Akil Dhirani

A pharmacist and entrepreneur who helped to sponsor and resettle Syrian refugees, welcomed newcomers into his home, organized food drives to promote food security in the region, especially during Ramadan, and mentored new pharmacists to make significant, tangible improvements in the lives of others in the Greater Toronto area;

Howard Doughty

A trailblazer in education who taught at Seneca College for 55 years, wrote more than 600 peer-reviewed publications and 50 books, delivered 100 academic conference papers and speeches on democracy, political economy, and higher education, and worked as a community organizer, environmental activist, and trade unionist earning the professor a ?Canada 150 Citizenship Award? for Thought Leadership;

Phiona Durrant

The President of the Aurora Black Community Association has worked tirelessly to amplify marginalized voices and champion the social well-being of racial minorities and persons with disabilities while serving on the Aurora Cultural Centre Board of Directors where she has played a key role in IDEA initiatives to create meaningful change, foster belonging, and bring people together;

Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Gordon

Served 36 years as an officer in the RCAF, worked with many young Inuit in trades training through the Royal Canadian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers to keep Arctic sites infrastructure and vehicles maintained, and volunteered with many veterans' groups including the Royal Canadian Military Institute and the Commissionaires' Retirees Association;

Charles Hendriks

Founded Performance Management Academy in over 50 Indigenous communities across the Yukon, Nunavut, and Northwest Territories to strengthen organizational capacity and effectiveness, and served as a dedicated educator at York University for over 25 years, earning 12 Teaching Excellence Awards for his dynamic teaching style and dedication to a generation of leaders;

Patrick Hung

The founder and CEO of Xinflix Media has been dedicated to fostering cultural exchange, community engagement, and inclusion through media promotion with large-scale events while promoting tourism, arts, and sports to elevate Canada's profile as a cultural hub and celebrate Canada's multicultural identity;

Levon Ichkhanian

Founder of Global Village Creative Inc, the highly-acclaimed Richmond Hill-based jazz musician, composer, producer, and recording artist who has shared his wealth of musical knowledge with the community through public concerts, clinics, and masterclasses, and has served as a musical ambassador by performing at the Beijing Olympics and with well-known artists like Sarah McLachlan;

Shabbir Jaffer

Has coached girls' soccer teams, supported local food banks, advanced community engagement as Chair of the Media and Education Board, led the Islamic Shia Ithna-Asheri Jamaa, overseen the MARC Library and Resource Centre, and spearheaded the Centre's acclaimed ?Roots of Abraham? exhibition which showcases the links between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam;

Gloria Marsh

An environmental champion in York Region who has innovated urban spaces, protected greenspaces, and served as Executive Director of the York Region Environmental Alliance to preserve the natural environment, protect water quality, find sustainable solutions to modern problems, and promote climate action, especially through the protection of the Oak Ridges Moraine;

Hamida Merchant

Under her leadership as property manager of Crescent Village, the non-profit housing complex has gained recognition as one of the best-managed affordable housing communities; the dedicated Richmond Hill resident had partnered with Sandgate Women's Shelter, York Region Police, and the York Region School Board to support single women and resolve safety issues;

Dr. Jan Oudenes

Established the MapleCross Fund alongside Dr. Isobel Ralston in 2017 to invest in and protect ecologically-sensitive land, preserve natural features and biological diversity in Canada for generations to come, to inspire others to safeguard our planet, and acquire 16,894 hectares of land for conservation and preservation of nature across Canada including the MapleCross Nature Reserve in King Township as part of the Oak Ridges Moraine Land Trust;

Adriana Pisano Beaumont

The educator, scientist, and healthcare professional has been an active member of many advocacy groups over the last thirty years including the Richmond Hill K9 Klub's Board of Directors, the Richmond Hill Winter Carnival Committee, and the newly-formed Coalition of Salutatory Women, as well as groups focusing on health care, animal rights, and community well-being;

Ernie Polsoni

The Social Committee Chairman of the Oak Ridges Knights of Columbus has held leadership roles with the Retired Teachers of Ontario, co-founded Our Lady of Annunciation Catholic Church and the parish's Knights of Columbus through which he has raised thousands of dollars to assist members of his community and others in need of financial assistance over the last forty years;

Lily Pourzand

An expert in gender equity and intersectionality of social services has served as the Director of Programs and Services at Sandgate Women's Shelter of York Region as well as the Director of Partnership and Community Engagement at Catholic Community Services of York Region over the last ten years to bridge service gaps, utilize resources, and foster communications;

Karim Premji

Through his work with Toastmasters International in York Region and Toronto, he has founded over 30 clubs, mentored more than 200 leaders, and delivered more than 1,000 speeches and presentations while enhancing English language skills for teachers and students in Asia through the Aga Khan schools and playing an integral role in supporting Ismaili Muslims in Canada;

Dr. Isobel Ralston

Established the MapleCross Fund alongside Dr. Jan Oudenes in 2017 to invest in and protect ecologically-sensitive land, preserve natural features and biological diversity in Canada for generations to come, to inspire others to safeguard our planet, and acquire 16,894 hectares of land for conservation and preservation of nature across Canada including the MapleCross Nature Reserve in King Township as part of the Oak Ridges Moraine Land Trust-- following a career in global drug development;

Arshia Sanjani

Is well-recognized at McMaster University for his academic excellence, commitment to innovation and leadership, and exceptional contributions to advancements in science and healthcare, medical research and fundraising for oral health, and garnering significant recognition in Canada for inspiring his peers and elevating the university's reputation in the field;

Rebecca Shields

Under her leadership, Canada's first framework to end chronic loneliness has been designed, the Canadian Mental Health Association in York Region and South Simcoe has expanded over 500% over the last eight years, and her work in the Gender-Affirming Health Clinic, Mobile Youth Walk-In Clinic, and Integrated Newcomer Health teams are being scaled across Ontario and Canada;

Alexander Van Hemert

Has volunteered at Southlake Hospital for over 25 years offering spiritual and practical help to patients and their families, lending a helping hand and offering a word of prayer to others in his community, and advocating against drunk driving by establishing the York Region chapter of Mothers Against Drunk Driving to educate youth and provide services for victims and survivors;

Susan Walmer

As CEO of Oak Ridges Moraine Land Trust, this strong environmental advocate oversees programs that protect ecologically-important land through partnerships and community engagement, encourages all citizens to further protect and restore the natural environment, and take action on climate change;

Thomas Yeung

A distinguished architect who is committed to working for the public good through his work as Chair of the Carefirst Seniors and Community Services Association, development of a modern long-term care home in Richmond Hill that will emphasize dignity and comfort for residents, and as Co-Chair of Veteran Bridging Homes Canada where he is working to create a Retreat Centre for veterans;

Margaret Zeidler

Trained as an architect, the founder and president of Urban Space Property Group has led projects including 401 Richmond?a home to a vibrant urban community for more than 140 diverse artists and cultural entrepreneurs?as well as co-founded the Centre for Social Innovation, Jane's Walk, the Centre of City Ecology, and the Urbanspace Gallery;

Jaclyn Zhang

The innovative entrepreneur and president of Futurevic Global Sourcing has supported her community through job creation, advocating for newcomers, and volunteerism while being a leader in importing and exporting, promoting Canadian health care services and products, and encouraging innovation through her leadership role with the Canada China Trade Innovation Alliance.

All recipients and their families enjoyed their photo op with MP Taylor Roy.

Taylor Roy moved seamlessly back and forth between post-ceremony photos and chatting with the press corps. She offered insights about the upbeat nature of the event.

?There's so much good for us to celebrate. The best of humanity is here today and we need events like this with so much negativity around us. The best part of today's ceremony was seeing people's faces when they were accepting the medals?they're all so selfless so it's nice to see them recognized in public.?

When asked if events like this were a remedy to the divisive political landscape that has been exacerbated by Donald Trump's existential threats to Canada, Taylor Roy noted: ?We need to work on celebrating these kinds of achievements over the next three years?it's an expression of our sovereignty and our unity as a country. I never thought I'd give Donald Trump credit for anything, but he has unified our country.?

In keeping with this country's deep-seated traditions, tea and sandwiches were served to the 116 guests assembled after a rendition of God Save the King.

By Jim Stewart