

Neighbourhood Network founders hope new chapter will stay close to original mission

Neighbourhood Network was founded as a way to connect community and address urgent needs ? and now that Magna International is winding down the volunteer- and non-profit-focused organization, those who were there at Neighbourhood Network's inception say they hope the next chapter will stay close to its original mission.

Magna announced the ?transition? of Neighbourhood Network into ?Magna in Action? on Wednesday, October 1. The new Magna in Action will focus ?on deepening community impact and expanding philanthropic efforts worldwide? rather than the local, York Region-focused lens of Neighbourhood Network.

Some of Neighbourhood Network's key initiatives will be taken on by other local organizations, including Neighbour Media, which will take on the role of connecting volunteers with opportunities in the community, while seminars and workshops to help charities and non-profits level up will be led by the Central York Chamber.

Other initiatives, however, such as their seasonal grocery drives benefiting food banks and pantries in York Region's northern six municipalities, and tree planting programs, will not continue, leaving some degree of uncertainty as to the continued impact of these initiatives.

Neighbourhood Network was first envisioned by Belinda Stronach and its earliest foundations were laid while she served as Member of Parliament for Newmarket-Aurora.

Steve Hinder, Neighbourhood Network's first manager, recalls it was born out of Stronach's understanding ?that there were needs in the community and there were those that could provide support.? The question she had was how to connect the two.

?The example she always liked to use was of a single mom whose fridge had died ? ?You can't tell me there's not 100 fridges in this community where the owners of which would love to find a home and donate but they don't know each other exists.?'

?Similarly, when it comes to charities and not-for-profits that are looking for volunteers, there's tons of people looking for the right opportunity to volunteer, the right thing to volunteer for, but there was no opportunity for one or the other to understand the needs on both sides of the coin. That's really what led to the creation of Neighbourhood Network,? says Hinder.

Neighbourhood Network initially had a particular focus on the two communities Stronach represented in Parliament, but, over the years, rapidly grew to serve King, Whitchurch-Stouffville, East Gwillimbury, and Georgina as well.

Growth was such that Neighbourhood Network was able to partner with more than 500 organizations, not-for-profits, and charities.

?I don't know what the final number was with registered volunteers, but it was incredible,? says Hinder. ?The piece I loved the most was we could actually go into high schools and talk to students about obtaining their community service hours? we were able to be face-to-face with them and talk about the values of volunteering, the importance of volunteering, and have those one-on-one interactions with students.

?I think we were very successful that way, and many students would come to our online presence to identify volunteer hours at work. The premise was always, if we could get someone to volunteer once and understand how it made you feel and enjoy the experience, we could very well have a volunteer for life, and our communities are so much better when we have people participating and rolling their sleeves up and getting engaged.?

Also engaging in those one-on-one interactions with students were a number of community ?ambassadors? for Neighbourhood Network, the first two of whom were former Aurora mayor Tim Jones and former Newmarket mayor Tom Taylor.

While Jones says he wasn't surprised by last week's announcement, it left him ?sad.?

?I really thought what we did in the community was community-based and hands-on,? says Jones, who said Neighbourhood Network's wind-down was reflective of the times and a re-focus on the part of Magna. ?I just think we were part of the best part of it because we were part of the creation and the development of it, so we had no choice to be totally involved, totally out there, and totally looking for new and greater things.?

While he's hopeful Neighbour Media and the Central York Chamber will keep their respective components of Neighbourhood Network's programming ?moving forward,? Jones adds that ?change is always challenging.?

?I just hope that it doesn't lose focus,? he says. ?I thought it provided such an easy way for people to know what was in the community and how to get involved. I just have to praise Belinda for having the idea and thank her for involving us and being able to take it and run with it. I really hope that it stays somewhat towards the base of why we created it.?

Hinder expresses a similar sentiment.

?The volunteering piece is critical, especially at a time when resources are where they are,? he says. ?I just think from personal development, we had a lot of volunteers who would come to us, people who had just retired. They'd say, ?Hey, I spent my life in the corporate world and now I'm at a stage in my life where I want to give back because I've never had the opportunity.'

?Neighbourhood Network is so unique to our community. It was created from the ground up and the people we connected with over the years was the strength of the program, for sure.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter