

Neighbourhood Network marks first decade of connecting community



By Brock Weir

It started off as a simple vision – just connecting potential volunteers in Aurora and Newmarket with opportunities available to them. But, in the ensuing decade, Neighbourhood Network has become much more than that: it has become an ever-growing hub that is all about connecting the community.

On Thursday, the Aurora-based Neighbourhood Network, which now serves Aurora, Newmarket, King, East Gwillimbury and Georgina, celebrates its first decade.

An initiative of Magna for Community from the days Belinda Stronach served as the local Member of Parliament, it now encompasses over 10,000 volunteers in its registered database who provide incalculable hours each year helping organizations and individuals who need it most.

“Neighbourhood Network is built on the premise that the community has needs and the community has resources,” says Magna for Community's Steve Hinder, “but neither one of them know that the other exists. I think we have been successful in creating that knowledge for people and that is why it has grown. A lot of people generally want to help and we just want to make sure what we do meets the right target, is worthy, meaningful, respected and appreciated.”

The last 10 years have been a period of consistent growth in a community which has been consistently growing as well.

“The growth shows that the community wants to be engaged, wants to volunteer and wants to give back,” says Neighbourhood Network's Erin Cerenzia. “It is a really positive thing to know that all the effort and work we're putting in with our small team here is so well received and received with open arms. Even though our community is changing and we have so many new residents coming in and new development, the look and feel of it continues to change but that small town desire to connect, know your neighbour and help still exists.”

It is easy to see this “small town desire” in action, particularly in this frosty time of year. Neighbourhood Network's Winter Snow Removal program, for instance, is in full swing. This program connects volunteers in the communities in which Neighbourhood Network operates with seniors and persons with disabilities who otherwise wouldn't be able to clear their way and remain mobile throughout the winter months.

It will be seen when the weather warms up once again with Neighbourhood Network's annual Spring Tree Planting which places thousands of new trees and shrubs throughout York Region; in the summer, coordinating groups of community volunteers who make the annual Magna Hoedown a celebration consistently earning over half a million dollars for community groups; in the fall with food drives to bolster local food banks; and when the winter rolls around once again, collecting thousands upon thousands of toys and gifts for needy families over the holidays.

Despite the holiday season fading into memory for another year, the toys for Neighbourhood Network's holiday drive are still

arriving at their Yonge Street headquarters, which was bursting at the seams when the drive hit its zenith this past December. 'We're small but mighty,' says Maggie Pelyvas of Neighbourhood Network, one member of their staff of four who helped serve 300 local families this holiday season partnered with numerous community organizations. 'They trust our mission and vision, and know we're a good resource to have.'

Neighbourhood Network's core programs are, more often than not, spearheaded after members of the community reach out to identify a gap in local services and are looking for resources for ways to fill those gap.

'The collaboration piece as we have established ourselves as an organization to help make those connections is amazing,' says Ms. Cerenzia. 'To be able to bring all area food pantry representatives together from six municipalities around the table to come up with ways they can share food and cross promote when they are such small organizations with little funding has a huge impact on their overall initiatives and place in the community.'

Adds: Mr. Hinder: 'The gift drive is a perfect example. We weren't even doing this and a small business owner from Aurora called in and said, 'Listen, we are a small business, we have few employees. In the past few years we have done a gift exchange but we've decided this is the year we want to give back and we have no idea where that need is.' He is just one example and we thought, 'There has to be more than that' and that has been the case and now the gift drive is on steroids, thanks to Maggie.

'The amount of hours she puts into this project is phenomenal and people are bringing stuff in just as organizations are picking things up. There is no way we could have accommodated everything that arrived here this holiday season ever.'

'It all comes back to the work Maggie is putting into it, but also having those people you can reach out to who know what those needs are,' interjects Ms. Cerenzia. 'Because we are non-political, people feel comfortable calling us, describing what their needs are and ask for help.'

To illustrate this point, Lisbeth Goodyear, another member of their mighty team of four ? which includes volunteer ambassadors in each community, former mayor Tim Jones being the ambassador for Aurora ? recalls a case this winter of a grandmother suddenly finding herself looking after her grandchildren on Christmas Eve after they were kicked out of their home.

She had nothing to give them and reached out to Neighbourhood Network.

'She came here and it just so happened that people had just donated stuff that fit their family,' says Ms. Goodyear. 'It was an amazing thing and we often find that. Usually when you're sitting here thinking, 'There's no more toys,' all of a sudden somebody walks in with more.'

As Neighbourhood Network marks its 10th anniversary this week, they are looking ahead to a year where everything they do will be built around this milestone. Their calendar is jammed, they say, and it is jammed with ideas of ways to strengthen these community bonds even further.

Soon after Neighbourhood Network set down roots in York Region, they distributed 500 door knockers to a newly developed neighbourhood in Aurora inviting each household out to a free community barbeque. It brought out 60 people and helped Neighbourhood Network sign up six more volunteers.

'I saw this as a huge accomplishment because so many of these neighbours didn't even know each other's names or didn't know who they were,' says Mr. Hinder. 'I believe the Town was built on a lot of people rolling up their sleeves and getting things done, and if we wanted to live in the same community we need people to get involved in the same community. This year, we're spreading out. We're going to plan one of these events in our five municipalities and go to a new neighbourhood to say to folks, 'Welcome aboard, but your job is just starting. You need to get involved and engaged, and we need you to be engaged with us.''

For more on how to become engaged in this milestone year for Neighbourhood Network, visit www.nnetwork.org.