

Oddfellows celebrate 150 years in Aurora



Above the ground-level commercial stores on Yonge Street beats a heart of service that is often overlooked in the community.

But the Aurora Lodge of the International Order of Oddfellows has worked quietly and consistently to improve the lives of Aurorans for 150 years and, still in the place it has called home for the last century-and-a-half, the group shows no signs of slowing down.

2024 is the Sesquicentennial year for the local lodge.

Originally founded with the mandate to "visit the sick, relieve the distressed, bury the dead and educate the orphan", its mandate has evolved over time and now includes financial support for individuals and organizations in need.

The Oddfellows were initially founded in Washington DC in 1819 as a fraternal organization. The organization has long been open to women and individuals of all background, although their work is often guided by Christian principles.

Helping guide the Sesquicentennial year for the local lodge is Brian North, who carries the leadership title of "Noble Grand."

"We are one of the strongest lodges financially and have been there for 150 years in the same spot; it's amazing that we've been there for 150 years and are still going. The legacy is still living on through our new members," says North.

North, a long-time Aurora resident, used to be one of the many residents who passed the lodge's sandy-hued brick façade without any conception of what went on just one storey above. He was first introduced to their mission and work when he led the Aurora Chamber of Commerce, but it was only in the last decade or so he walked through their doors, up the steep flight of stairs, and into a lodge that appears as though it's been largely untouched since the first crop of Oddfellows took their places in 1874.

"I think it is fabulous what they have done in the community and people don't realize they have done it," says North. "In the time I have been there, [one example of work is] we helped the Easter Seals when there was a kid who couldn't bathe through COVID.

They couldn't get them in and out, they no longer could take them through the day program, so we bought a lift for them so that they could get their adult child in and out of a bath tub. The things that we do for people are ? it can be amazing and that's what attracted me to it, the fact that we can help people in need and do it quietly yet make their lives a little bit easier.?

Asked why the work of the Oddfellows sometimes flies under the radar, North says they're simply focused on doing good works rather than seeking attention.

?It is just so nice to be able to help those in need and to meet new friends, to become friends, and? when some of our members have been going through some rough times, whether it is a health issue or, God forbid, death or loss of loved ones, we try to be there for those friends and members.?

Celebrating a significant anniversary such as this is not necessarily within the comfort zone of an organization that works under the radar, and indeed North says their celebrations are ?a work in progress? but some of the ways they're going to engage the community at this time includes participating next month in commemorations marking the 100th anniversary of the Royal Canadian Air Force in Bradford.

Earlier this month, they also installed street banners outside their long-time base celebrating members of the past.

?We want to commemorate those from the past,? says North. ?We had a lot of people. When you look at the history of the Oddfellows, we have Valerie Taylor who has done so much history searching and history on the Oddfellows and some of the members that streets are named after in Aurora ? prominent people in Aurora who were members of the Oddfellows.

?We want to celebrate that we have been around for a long time. People drive by our building every day and they have no ideas we're there. I was guilty of that ? I have been in Aurora for over 40 years and I had no idea they were there outside of the Aurora Chamber of Commerce. We want to be able to celebrate it, let people know what we're about, and maybe it will increase some membership.?

For more information on the Oddfellows' Aurora Lodge #148, visit auroralodge148.ioof.net.

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