

Optimist Club celebrates its 40th anniversary of service to Aurora's youth with Legion celebration



Charter member and founding Vice President Alex Ansell delivered the keynote address at the Optimist Club's 40th Anniversary Dinner on Thursday night at the Royal Canadian Legion in Aurora.

Emcee and former Optimist President Carol Bartlett introduced the amiable Ansell who was encircled by club artefacts on display in the Legion's main dining hall.

Ansell, who was inducted into the Aurora Sports Hall of Fame in 2014 as a community builder, reflected with fondness on building upon the service club's modest beginnings in 1985.

“The Kiwanis and Kinsmen Clubs had met their demise in the 80's and we needed 35 members to charter. On June 12, 1985, we chartered with 37 members and we have never dropped below that number in membership. Ken McIsaac, Neville Gynan, and George Gonsalves were there at the beginning of the club's formation and they're here tonight. After not being allowed to join service clubs, women joined our club for the first time in 1988.”

Ansell, 89, spoke glowingly about the significance of the current female leadership in the club and cited the Optimists' historical achievements including “our continuing role in the Town's Santa Claus Parade, and getting the Mobile Kitchen up and running in 1992 with a grant from Frank's Fiesta”the precursor to the Hoedown.”

“Our Book Sales raised \$140,000 for the Aurora Library and there is a room on the second floor of the Library honoring our club's contributions and legacy.”

The engaging keynote speaker also discussed initiatives that were developed to help the youth of Aurora and are still running today decades after their launches.

“Our Chess Tournament has been running for over 26 years, engaging hundreds of elementary school children, and our Aurora Hockey Showcase has been around for 24 years. All in all, we've raised over \$2.5 million for the youth of our community here in Aurora. We're going to keep on changing with the times – just as we did in the club's early years. The evidence of achievement is there—it's all around us tonight in the scrapbooks, the binders, and the banners we have on display.”

Ever the Optimist, Ansell segued from honoring the past to predicting the service club's bright future as the energetic octogenarian concluded his keynote: “As we celebrate these milestones, let us remember our best achievements are still to come.”

Ansell received a standing ovation from the assembly and took his place among the fourteen former Optimist Club Presidents in attendance for a historic group photo taken by Glenn Rodger that capped off the evening's festivities.

A Million Mouthfuls also played a starring role in those festivities. Dinner guests praised the catering company's tender and flavorful braised beef short rib and the Fuzion Shiraz Malbec table wine as an indomitable pairing. They also lauded the range of flavors in the seasonal greens appetizer.

Chef and owner Anne-Marie Million discussed the ingredients of the starter: "Tonight's Summer Salad [was comprised of] baby lettuces, baby heirloom tomatoes, roasted yellow beets, shredded heirloom carrots, fresh herbs, watermelon radish, toasted almonds, blueberries, and a honey lavender dragon vinaigrette infused with local dragon fruit powder. All ingredients are sourced from local, small farms."

Million's main course also featured the fresh flavors associated with late-summer Farm to Table events in Central Ontario.

The community spirit of the Optimists has also been locally-sourced since 1985 and Thursday night's celebration of the esteemed service club's 40th anniversary was a testament to its ongoing support of local youth over parts of the last five decades.

Event Notes: Outgoing Optimist President Deb Finnear was pleased with the level of participation at the 40th anniversary party: "It's a really big event for the club. It's a big achievement for a service club to be growing in membership after forty years. Over 66 guests joined us for dinner tonight and it was nice to have "Take 2" provide us with music during the reception. It's great to see so many people here tonight from Tiny Township, Peterborough, Niagara Region, Newmarket, and Keswick to join our celebration." Finnear took great pride in presenting the Club's **2025 Rookie of the Year Award to Harold Reiter** and lauded the accomplishments of **2025 Optimist of the Year Maggie Thornton**.

Aurora Mayor Tom Mrakas expressed his admiration of the Optimist Club's achievements during our pre-meal chat: "Forty years of contributions going back to the eighties - the longevity and the exemplary spirit of the Optimist Club is remarkable. They've given so much to the youth of the community. Anytime we have an event, the Mobile Kitchen is a great partnership as they've provided food and drinks for us for over thirty years. Money that goes to the Optimist Club is always a win-win for Aurora whether it's the Chess Tournament, the Old Soap Box Derby, or the Santa Claus Parade - the Club is always here to help." In his post-dinner speech, Mayor Mrakas recalled joining the Optimist Club twenty years ago and praised the Club's positive impact on Aurora: "You've made such a difference in empowering our community's youth. Your presence is felt in every corner of the Town. Through scholarships, bursaries, and events like the Chess Tournament and the Santa Claus Parade, you make a difference and that's the real gift of the Optimist Club. Here's to many more years of Optimism and community-building."

Incoming Optimist Club President Stu Bundy was pleased to announce that "We are going to be holding Bingo Nights again starting in January" and he thanked "[former Club President] Glen Sharp for the heavy lifting. Thousands of dollars are going to be raised for kids in our community."

Optimist Club Lieutenant-Governor Rob Gaby brought greetings from **Governor Bonnie Sheer-Porteous** who extended "her sincere thanks and congratulations to the Optimist Club of Aurora in achieving this momentous milestone." Gaby also introduced **Sheril and Paul Thomson** and **Lauralee Reily from the Optimist Club of Keswick** as well as **John Large from the Optimist Club of Newmarket**. The long-time member of the Optimist Club also acknowledged "our **founding Vice President Alex Ansell** who holds the district position as Parliamentarian. He most recently spearheaded us to a third-place finish in our inaugural entry at the Bed Races sponsored by the Optimist Club of Keswick. We were a formidable team with an average age of 72.3 years. We gave the Junior C Georgina Ice Dogs a real walk for their money! We want to thank him for his display tonight of our accomplishments to date." In closing, Gaby applauded the chief organizers of the dinner: "**Carol Bartlett, Deb Finnear, Sandra Watson, Maggie Thornton, and Aurora Citizen of the Year, Sandy Bundy**."

By Jim Stewart Local Journalism Initiative Reporter