

Optimists hit the road to celebrate 40 years of helping local youth



Helping a youth become all they can be might seem like a daunting task, especially if they're not your own. But week in and week out in this community, a passionate group of volunteers have been doing just that ? in ways big and small ? and have been doing so for four decades.

Last week, the Optimist Club of Aurora, which was founded on the principle of ?being a friend to youth,? marked its 40th anniversary in the community with a Road Rally throughout and beyond Aurora.

Designed to take participants on a veritable scavenger hunt of challenges through Aurora, Newmarket, and northern Richmond Hill, the event, which was based out of Highland GM Chevrolet Buick GMC, saw dozens of participants set out to complete challenges, collect points and, most importantly, raise tens of thousands of dollars for local youth initiatives.

The Optimist Club of Aurora that is celebrating this spring is the second Optimist Club to serve Aurora. The first chapter operated from 1967 before folding around 1974, and the present club was re-established in 1985 by parents looking to help their kids and their children's peers.

?In those days, we had young kids, I was involved in minor hockey, and our girls were involved in various sports, and there was interest there in doing something that would possibly assist youth ? not just my own kids, but others within the Town,? says founding member Alex Ansell, who helped re-establish the service club alongside Don McCallum and Ash Sangani, and remains a key volunteer with the organization 40-years on. ?The scope of what we do is unlimited as far as I'm concerned.?

As Ansell looked back on how the club has grown, developed and evolved over the past four decades, he looks to the Optimists' long-running Chess Tournament, their long-time involvement in marshalling the Town's annual Santa Claus parade, and past events such as their Minor Hockey Showcase, Book Sale, and Bike Rodeo, which saw members teach kids about cycling safety while making sure their wheels were in tip-top condition.

While the hockey showcase, book sale, and bike rodeo might be events of the past, they have since re-focused many of their activities to have the maximum impact on the child and youth, including their KIND (Kids in Need Delivered) program, which looks at pressing needs of individual kids ? such as boots and mitts in the winter to eyeglasses and pencil crayons in the back-to-school season ? and addressing them.

?I was always involved with minor sports in Aurora when my son was growing up, and I've been a volunteer for 50 years, and I knew that once my son was finished with minor sports, I would be finished too because it was time for another parent to take over ?

but I still wanted to volunteer and [one group] that interested me was the Optimist Club because it was about youth," says Carol Bartlett, an Optimist of 26 years and counting.

Looking back on her own time with the Club, she cites the Optimists' work as a driving force behind the Hartwell Challenge, a community run inspired by the life of late councillor and Optimist Bob Hartwell who died after running the Toronto Marathon. The Hartwell Challenge, now known as the Run for Southlake, has since raised millions of dollars for the local hospital since these humble, early days.

"We continue to support different areas of the hospital," she says. "A few years ago, we supported buying a monitor for the children's oncology clinic. It was brand new, the clinic had only been in operation less than a year, and when we asked them to identify some needs, that's what they came up with. We wanted to ease parents so they didn't have to go down to Princess Margaret or SickKids and the children could be treated here close to home. We've always supported Southlake and we'll continue."

Support for education is cited by Glen Sharp, a member who is celebrating his 20th year with the organization in 2025.

From providing scholarships to students from all Aurora high schools "each selected by the school in question" to supporting stay-in-school initiatives spearheaded by the Canadian Federation of University Women, Sharp says they're also focused on their Healthy Snacks program, which is currently partnered with five elementary schools and one secondary school in the community.

"There's so many kids coming to school with empty stomach and no lunches," he says. "It's very sad, but we're glad to help out with that. Currently, we're applying for a bingo license to receive funds from Charitable Gaming in Richmond Hill and, if we do, we'll have a lot more money to share in that regard. We've shifted a little more to sort of the social, societal aspects because that's where the need is right now."

If you attend any community events throughout the spring and summer, chances are you've sampled a hamburger or a hot dog from the Optimist Mobile kitchen, which the Club takes out to help make any number of occasions a success.

Sharp explains that when they are asked to bring the mobile kitchen out to a school event "such as a spring fair" the school gets up to \$500 back just by having them there.

"We're getting more and more requests from that from different schools," says Sharp. "We believe in community service. Yes, we need money to help others, but we do things that are community service as well. Sometimes I feel like volunteering is a selfish act because you get so much out of it; it just feels so good to be able to do something for others and nobody is looking for a pat on the back. You just feel good about it. For those of us in the Optimist Club, it just comes naturally. You have to tell people in the Optimist Club to stop putting their hand up, because we all put our hands up way too often!"

Adds Ansell: "I think our reward are the smiles on the kids' faces for something that we have helped them with, whether it be food, whether it be sports. That's our reward."

To learn more about the Optimist Club of Aurora and what it has to offer, the 40th anniversary celebration will continue at the Aurora Farmers' Market next Saturday, June 14, with an event dubbed "Growing with Optimism," where kids will be invited to decorate a flower pot to take home, complete with seeds.

The event will take place between 8 a.m. and 1 p.m. at Aurora Town Park.

By Brock Weir