

Portraits of Giving honours Aurora resident Smith in Class of 2025



Greg Smith of Music Aurora is this year's Aurora honoree in the 2025 Portraits of Giving program.

Portraits of Giving is the brainchild of Richmond Hill photographer Karen Merk and since its inception more than 15 years ago has honoured dozens of York Region residents who have proven themselves dedicated volunteers.

This year's Aurora recipient, Smith, a long-standing local business leader and proponent of live music within the community.

Each honoree is featured in an artistic photographic portrait by Merk at the location of their choice, and Smith's chosen location is a poignant one: John Abel Park, a greenspace dedicated to Aurora's two-term Deputy Mayor, a good friend of Smith's, who died suddenly just days after his term on Council came to a close in 2018.

Smith was recognized Wednesday night with a reception hosted by Merk at Chartwell Hollandview Trail, just north of Town Hall, where the story that accompanies Smith's portrait was shared by Rod Johnson.

'His fingers are always on the pulse of Aurora's growth,' read Johnson. 'When you hear him boast, you will not hear him boast or brag about his own accomplishments, and you've probably never heard him even mention Promotional Marketing, his creative, clever, and adaptive marketing business, he's kept thriving over the past 40 years, making massive impacts on our culture and history, as Canadian and as sports enthusiasts.

'In 2013, Greg met [Abel] and because of their community-centered priorities and involvements, the two became fast friends. Greg has been an important member of many local organizations, including the Odd Fellows, Downtown Aurora BIA, he's a board member of the Aurora Public Library, and his not-for-profit Music Aurora created and produced the award-winning Aurora Winter Blues Festival, the Aurora Music Festival, and Porch Fest, supporting youth and live music in and around Aurora.

'Anyone who had the opportunity to know John knows the wound of his absence and the irreplaceable heart he had for our Town and its people. As of 2024, we now have a place to honour and keep the spirit of the name John Abel alive and continue to impact the community [with] John Abel Park. Located on Hartwell Way, it features a nature-based playground, a natural rock amphitheatre, a gorgeous community garden, and the trailhead plaza connects to the David Tomlinson Nature Reserve if you want to keep exploring.

'Trying to keep his emotions steady, Greg confessed, 'I'm a better person because of him. Not a day goes by that I don't think of him, and I often ask myself, what would John do? And that's how I live my life now without him physically here.' John's passions and love lives on in our hearts and in the community. We didn't get to say goodbye to him, and we do not wish to. Love does not

stop when life leaves the body. Love does not end.?

Kudos were also shared by Stewart Maclaren of Music Aurora, before Smith took to the podium himself, thanking Johnson and his brother for sponsoring the evening.

?John was very much a person that didn't really seek the limelight [and] that was one reason we connected,? said Smith, sharing a story that shortly after Abel's passing Smith took part in a Rise and Shine breakfast hosted by Aurora United Church for vulnerable members of the Aurora community, where Abel was a long-time volunteer and musician. ?I'm standing there, and this lady, very frail with pain, comes over and talks to me, and she says, ?You're a friend of John's? Let's sit down.' So, we sit down and have a conversation. For many years she was living in her car, and she would be there at breakfast, and John would always sit with her, and she'd go and get John a coffee, and John would slip some money into her bag or whatever. He'd never talked about this or anything like that, but she tells me that she's originally from China, and that she had never been back to see her family. She tells me the story of how John helped her be able to get plane tickets and stuff to go back, and then showed up, dropped off at her house without anybody knowing, sent her luggage for her in order to go back to China. He was very selfless. Even his wife never knew anything about that.

?I had never heard anything about John doing something like that, but that was the kind of guy he was. For many of us who golfed on Sunday mornings at Westview where John worked, he had this saying?When you teed off, you would put another ball in your pocket, and if you hit a lousy shot, you'd yell, ?Jerry,' and then you could put a ball down and hit another shot. It was kind of John's way of giving people a second chance. And he was very much like that throughout his life, and that's what inspired me to get the photo at John Abel Park.?

Portraits of Giving's Class of 2025 includes The Belcastro Family, Don Miller, Rob Payne, Rosa Cirillo, Vincenza (Vee) and Alan Palenchuk, Allyson Park, Annie Rong, Sam Daskalopoulos and family, Muhammad Kermalli, Wasim Jarrah, Elisabeth Jaja, Leanne Sexton and Ron Marino & Pax.

For more information on this year's program, recipients, and where to see their portraits, visit www.merkphotography.com/portraits-of-giving.

By Brock Weir