

Portraits of Giving honours community builders, looks to the future



For 13 years, Portraits of Giving has honoured through art the persons ? adults, seniors and youth ? who have given of themselves to make York Region a better place.

But this year, while the touring exhibition by Richmond Hill photographer Karen Merk is honouring these community builders, it is also casting its focus to the future, looking at how we can live ?more fully? in a post-pandemic world.

The 2022 Portraits of Giving honourees were recognized last week at Newmarket's Pickering College.

Among this year's group of notable residents captured by Ms. Merk's lens were Aurora honouree Marco Iacovetta, Richmond Hill's Pamela and Harry Harakh, Susan Heslop-Porter of King Township, Markham's Shanta Sundarason, Julia Suppa of Vaughan, Beth Cowper-Fung of Georgina, Dean and Karen Woods of Stouffville, Marjorie Niemi and Family representing East Gwillimbury, and Pickering College Head of School Peter Sturup representing Newmarket.

Special recognition went to Lifetime Achievement honouree Linda Dennis, as well as Suraj Bansal, who has received the Benson Kearley SMAI Young Adult recognition.

Sergeant Mina Rahrvan and Susan Gibbs have been recognized for their work with the York Regional Police, and Helen Galanis for York Region's Fire and Paramedic Services, while Mitch Marner and his family have been recognized for their contributions to the sporting world.

?We have been pivoting during the pandemic, but we know that people are still giving back,? says Ms. Merk. ?This year's group of honourees are more amazing people in York Region and have given back in the past and continue to do so throughout the pandemic. They keep giving back in different ways. Our theme this year is always to inspire people to start or keep giving back through their stories and portraits, but I also added a theme of how we can live more when we're pulling out of the pandemic.

?Common threads [amongst the honourees] are definitely giving back and doing so with perseverance, resilience and hope because it has still been challenging times for everyone. I think that all of them share those attributes and just keep going.?

Joia Restaurant owner Iacovetta has been recognized for how he and his business have contributed to the community over several years, including a golf tournament benefiting local charities.

?He does it quietly and humbly and I think he is a great person,? says Ms. Merk. ?Especially in the restaurant industry that has been

really hit hard over the years, he really cares about the community and gives back. It's not easy to organize a golf fundraiser. It takes a lot of time and commitment to do that, so Marco really inspires. He's a great representation of the kind of people we have in York Region who, through their kindness and generosity, help the community.?

One of the key things Ms. Merk has taken away from this year's honourees can be underscored by Pickering College's Peter Sturup who cites a biography accompanying his portrait, ?To Peter, leadership is not about personality, it's about character. It's not about skills, but actions ? actions that collectively define our lives and that becomes our legacy.?

?I want people to leave [the exhibition] feeling inspired that despite the challenging times we have all had, there are many positive things that are happening in our community,? says Ms. Merk. ?It is the perseverance, resilience and hope that our honourees have.?

The 2022 Portraits of Giving Photographic Exhibition is currently touring York Region.

It will have two showings in Aurora.

The first exhibition will land at Aurora Town Hall from August 17 to 31, and again, this time at the York Regional Police headquarters on Don Hillock Drive, from October 21 to November 4.

For more information on the tour and current and past honourees, visit www.merkphotography.com/portraits-of-giving.

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