

Portraits of Giving recognizes Gonsalves for lifetime achievement



By Brock Weir

When she and her family first arrived in Aurora, Rosalyn Gonsalves quickly set to work making the place she decided to raise her family a better place to live.

Nearly 40 years on, her decades of volunteerism within the community were recognized Thursday with her being named 'Life Time Giver' in the 2019 Portraits of Giving photographic exhibition.

Spearheaded by Richmond Hill photographer Karen Merk, Portraits of Giving recognizes the volunteer achievements of residents and community-builders spanning York Region.

Ms. Gonsalves, who came to Canada from South America, was recognized this year alongside Michael Croxon, Benny Socia, Tina Tehranchian, Kelly and Mike Foley, Eric Tappenden, Daniela Hofmann, Gary and Gina Semeniuk, Patrick LeBlanc, Anita Smeskal-Donato, newly-minted OPP Commissioner Tom Carrique (recognized by the York Regional Police), Chief Deryn Rizzi, Kirk Kelly and Lauren Castelino.

'I was very honoured and humbled by the nomination made by Sandra Ferri of the Aurora Chamber of Commerce,' says Ms. Gonsalves, whose roots with the Chamber run deep. 'This was certainly not what I was expecting.'

For over 20 years, from 1985 to 2006, Ms. Gonsalves served as General Manager of the Aurora Chamber of Commerce. It was a time of significant development for the Chamber and during her tenure she helped spearhead a number of firsts including the Aurora Home Show in 1987 and the Aurora Street Festival, both of which remain popular to this day.

She first applied
for the job when her children were in Grades 1 and 3.

'I wanted to get out
of the house,' she says with a laugh and, perhaps, a degree of
self-depreciation.

At the time, the
Chamber could offer wages of \$4 an hour, but that didn't matter to her. They
only had \$3,000 in the bank back then, no permanent home, but at the end of her
term as General Manager, their finances were more secure and they had built a
new permanent home built with zero debt thanks to some canny fundraising.

'I thoroughly
enjoyed what I was doing and I felt that there was a need in the community to
raise awareness about what a Chamber could provide for businesses within the
Town,' she says. 'In 1985, John West was Mayor of Aurora and [by nature of his
position] was sitting on the Chamber's Board as a non-voting individual. He
dared us, 'You will never be able to do a home show,' and I said, 'Watch me.'
The first Home Show was done in 1987 and the intent behind it was to bring
awareness in the community to what businesses had to offer and the Home Show
still continues 33 years later.'

The Aurora Chamber
of Commerce, however, was not Ms. Gonsalves' first foray into being a local
difference-maker.

Little more than a
year after she, her husband George, and their two children settled into their
new hometown, people across Aurora soon learned her name as she went door to
door collecting signatures for a highly successful petition to eliminate
long-distance charges on calls made from Aurora to Toronto.

The resulting
petition of 5,000 signatures was presented in the House of Commons by then-MP
Sinclair Stevens and, from there, it made its way through the CRTC to become a
reality.

Just a few years
later, through her volunteerism with the Canadian Cancer Society, she met a
woman called Mildred Wickson. Ms. Gonsalves' daughter was set to be in a ballet
recital and she invited Ms. Wickson, who was instrumental in the establishment
of the National Ballet of Canada, to come along.

Her guest was struck
by the talent of a young ballerina playing the Snow Queen, sensing she might be
the right material for the National Ballet.

'Mildred was very

instrumental in getting the young lady into the National Ballet, Ms. Gonsalves recalls. Unfortunately, by the time the young ballerina performed in The Nutcracker, Mildred had already passed away. However, she left in her will a bursary for this young ballerina from Aurora to continue and pursue her career at the National Ballet, which she did, and she is still a ballet instructor.

Ms. Gonsalves has also dedicated her time to supporting parent councils where her children attended school, has served on various councils at Our Lady of Grace Catholic Church, the Friends of the Aurora Public Library, the Economic Development Advisory Committee for the Town of Aurora, and currently volunteers a number of hours each month with the PROBUS Club of Aurora, the Newmarket Voice Festival, and the Optimist Club of Aurora.

I have been a member of the Optimists now for seven years and I am always happy when I am able to attend their functions, she says, noting that for the past four years she has taken special interest in the Optimists' scholarship program which provides bursaries each year to students attending Aurora's five high schools. The Optimists are a 'Friend of Youth,' so we try to support as many of the events as we can in Town.

Volunteering builds a sense of community and belonging. It also helps to develop your creativity and open-mindedness to new ideas of affecting change. That's exactly what I feel: it is building a sense of community and belonging and I think that is very vital.

Portraits of Giving

2019 is now on display in the Great Hall of the Regional Municipality of York (17250 Yonge Street, Newmarket). The portraits exhibition arrives in Aurora from June 24 - July 14 at Aurora Town Hall and from September 16 - October 1 at the York Regional Police headquarters.