

Portraits of local heroes painted in words and photos



By Brock Weir

When Aurora's Cindy Shaver was asked to write the companion book for the upcoming Portraits of Giving 2013 exhibition, she had her work cut out for her.

Writing was not the problem for the former newspaper editor, who now works in the communications department of the Aurora Public Library, but drawing her subjects out of themselves.

This is the fourth year for the Portraits of Giving Exhibition, which opens in the Great Hall of the Aurora Cultural Centre next Thursday, June 20. The show brings together the photography of Richmond Hill's Karen Merk as she seeks to shine a spotlight on those people in York Region who continue to give back, but don't often find themselves in the limelight they deserve.

Their stories, including Aurora residents Jennifer Ettinger, Brooke Harrison, and Stewart MacLaren, of why they got involved and why they continue to get involved are rich tales that cover early parental influences or sudden 'aha!' moments, but getting to the root of their roots is half the battle.

'All our honourees are very humble and not really that comfortable stepping out into the limelight,' says Ms. Shaver. 'They are not really here for the recognition, so there were some people I knew before hand, but then there were others such as Mark Hebert, owner of Cosmo Music in Richmond Hill that I hadn't had the pleasure of meeting.'

'Like any journalist, you do your investigations beforehand to have a little bit of a base, checking up on their website to see if they have been covered in the local news, so when you ask the question, 'What sorts of things have you done?', and they then say, 'Well, I don't think I have done anything,' you can say, 'Actually, yes, you have.''

Aurora, she says, has 'fantastic' community members who are heavily involved in many facets of the community.

'Stewart is just so humble and in-tune with the arts community, he has spent so much time and effort giving back,' she says of the long-time Theatre Aurora volunteer. 'That's what's so cool because you can have your regular day job and your volunteer commitments speak to your other passions. Jennifer is very in tune with women. Her business is Fit Your Style, which helps to address women's body issues and personal training.'

'Her whole mantra is 'Strength from within' and 'Women are Strong.' She does so much work with the Women's Centre of York Region and making sure those women can become strong again. They are found in difficult situations and Jennifer just owns that whole mantra. She is such an inspiring person to talk to.'

As for Ms. Harrison, Ms. Shaver says the exhibition has, in the past, typically highlighted business people, but Ms. Merk decided to make an exception in her honour. Brooke, she said, was "just so fabulous" they had to include her.

"Once I got chatting with Brooke, I was just blown away," says Ms. Shaver of the University of Western Ontario student who got her start in philanthropy aged just six with the creation of her book *Cookin' in Brooke's Kitchen* to raise money for leukemia research.

"Since she was six years old, she has been doing volunteer things and it is a family affair, which is very impressive. Her parents volunteer and her brother volunteers, and she is so humble and yet so eager to help in any way that she can. It is very refreshing and she sets the bar high for the youth of today."

Through her previous work with SNAP Aurora, Ms. Shaver was familiar with many of the people featured in this year's exhibition and while people like Mr. Hebert were new to her, even some of the more familiar faces threw her curveballs as got down to business during the interviews.

One was Mike Smith of Smith-Rogers Financial. Although she knew he had a charitable side working with him on golf tournaments, she had little idea of the extent of his work with Southlake Regional Health Centre and local sports teams. An Oak Ridges resident is honoured for her work with the Terry Fox Run, but comes in with an added perspective of having campaigned with Mr. Fox during his original Marathon of Hope. Volunteerism was, as Ms. Shaver found out, in her blood, learning that her mother started her own philanthropic journey working alongside Mother Teresa.

"That's pretty remarkable, right?" says an understated Ms. Shaver.

"The main thing is we want people to be inspired. There are so many fabulous things going on in the community, and so many fabulous people who are responsible for making it the great community that it is. We want to come and celebrate this small selection of fabulous people within our community and be inspired to become more involved themselves."

Portraits of Giving opens June 20 at 7 p.m. at the Aurora Cultural Centre, 22 Church Street.