

## Restaurant puts new spin Aurora tradition as hosts of Mardi Gras



**By Brock Weir**

Aurora's Taylor Dinner was 21 when he began his battle with Hodgkin's Lymphoma.

Now 25, he has been in remission for four years and credits a great deal of his recovery to the nurses and staff at Southlake Regional Health Centre. Happy and healthy once again, Mr. Dinner is now general manager at Aw, Shucks!, the popular oyster bar which, since its recent relocation, has become a focal point of Downtown Aurora.

When word reached him about a degree of uncertainty over this year's Mardi Gras bash, he decided it was his turn to step up and give back to his local hospital.

'We wanted to step in and make something happen here, it is just as easy as that,' he explains. 'I have been at Mardi Gras a couple of times myself and it is such a great thing for Aurora and Southlake.'

Mardi Gras for Southlake was founded over 14 years ago by Carolyn Hamill and John O'Bireck. Back then, the parents put their heads together to establish for what was then simply a fundraiser for a local dancing school.

From its humble beginnings, it has grown exponentially to become one of the largest annual fundraisers in the Southlake and York Region calendar.

This year, however, presented some challenges to organizers. Opting to sit out 2014 while they strategized for the 2015 event, they were presented with a unique opportunity by Mr. Dinner, along with restaurant owners Larry Smith and Ross Jones.

The group will conspire to bring together what is billed as an 'up-scale event featuring a full multi-course sit-down Cajun dinner, entertainment, party favours, drinks and decorations' to the Mardi Gras North Foundation with all proceeds going to the Paediatric Oncology Clinic at Southlake.

'We said if we didn't pull in a big sponsor, we'd put it off for a year,' says Mr.O'Bireck. 'We were going to focus on individual restaurants. Taylor was [in on the discussion] and Larry turned around and said, 'What about us doing it?' Larry likes to give back and he said he wanted to do his part in any way he can.'

By the time doors open at Aw, Shucks! on March 1 for Mardi Gras, the group has a vision that will bring a 'wow factor' to Mardi Gras regulars and newcomers.

'I think it is going to be a wild night,' says Mr. Dinner. 'We are anticipating quite a big crowd here and we just have so much space

to offer here. We're a new spot, and it's kind of happening and on the upswing and I think it is going to be amazing.?

Plans include taking over all three floors of the restaurant, two bands on two levels, including the third floor patio, weather permitting. By the time March rolls around, they also hope to have the finishing touches on their upstairs events hall bringing their capacity of 420 up to 500.

?Our goal is to maximize the dollars going to the hospital, however, we also don't want to do something that is going to take the evening from Aw, Shucks! says Mr. O'Bireck. ?You don't want to have so many ticket sales people walking around that room that people walk away from there and have the sense someone's hand was in their pocket every five seconds. You want to get the biggest bang for your buck without disrupting the goodwill they are presenting to their clients and customers.?

Mr. O'Birick, members of the volunteer committee, and indeed members of the Southlake Hospital Foundation, say they hope this is not just a one-off event but will encourage other restaurants to follow Aw, Shucks!' lead so Mardi Gras can be held in a network of restaurants and eateries throughout the Southlake community, connected by live feeds and the spirit of the occasion.

?You could run this model in many restaurants around York Region and that is really what we wanted to do,? he says. ?You could have a \$100 night at Aw, Shucks! or \$40 elsewhere to bring on the same model. That way people would still be supporting the hospital, but being entertained in the place they want to be.?

While plans are underway for future connections, the volunteers and, in particular, Mr. Dinner, have their eyes firmly set on March 1.

?I can't even imagine what it is going to be like,? says Mr. Dinner. ?If you have ever been here on the weekend, it is very happening and very busy and I think it is going to be very easy for us to emulate that same environment and atmosphere with Mardi Gras. I think what we're bringing to it is a kind of party element which is going to be very interesting. It is tighter quarters with more mixing.

?I told our bar tender who is from Australia who doesn't really know what Mardi Gras is and said, ?If you're looking for a good time, and want to see what it is all about, you have to come out and experience this because it is one hell of a party.?

For more information on Mardi Gras 2014, including upcoming ticket information, visit [www.mardigrasforsouthlake.com](http://www.mardigrasforsouthlake.com).