

Revitalization would be perfect holiday gift for Aurora's 'hidden village'?



Lindsay Grace, a resident of Aurora for more than 40 years, grew up 'living above the shop' but this was no apartment above a store on a busy thoroughfare. Instead, it was a modern apartment above a store in Aurora's St. Andrew's Village, a place which fostered a very unique sense of a community within Aurora, but slightly apart.

When the plaza opened, it was often seen as hub for specialized retail on its Yonge Street and Orchard Heights Boulevard frontage and, within its courtyards hidden from the hustle and bustle of one of the Town's busiest corridors, a community for artists and creatives that was unique in northern York Region.

The successes of St. Andrew's Plaza have ebbed and flowed over the decades, and this holiday season, a group of volunteers, business owners and, in a nod to its roots, creatives are coming together to try to make it a destination for Aurorans once again.

'Back in the mid-to-late 1990s, when it was probably at its peak,' Lindsay recalls of when she called the place home. 'One of the things I loved about it is it was completely different from anything else around. It reminded me, especially with the courtyard and apartments, of Melrose Place without a pool! In the mid-to-late 90s, there was a community vibe.'

Efforts to restore this sense of community to the often-overlooked landmark is now headed into its second season. Volunteers activated the space last Christmas with a special tree lighting ceremony designed to draw the community in. This work continued over the summer with outdoor marketplace days and different initiatives benefiting Southlake Regional Health Centre.

Now, as Christmas and the Holiday Season approaches, the mission is kicking into overdrive with events designed for families, and even couples looking for a memorable night out on the Town.

'I'm hearing the message over and over that people are sad we're slipping away from being this small, contained Town [and] that St. Andrew's reflects what Aurora would have been like,' says volunteer Rebekah Murdoch, one of the leads of the current revitalization effort, 'As we expand and grow, we're losing sight of the small businesses and everything is a big box. I feel there is this reversal back to small shopping, small supporting and St. Andrew's has that potential for less driving because you're all in one contained area. I feel the plaza represents a micro-version of what Aurora is.'

The first of this season's big public events was a kick-off held in the courtyard last Thursday which saw businesses stay open later in the evening as Mayor Tom Mrakas helped switch on the courtyard's Christmas tree and light display, while the York Regional Police

took the chance to highlight Holiday Heroes Campaign.

Up next, on Saturday, December 14, from 6 ? 9 p.m. is a free musical evening for the whole family with a performance from Back Yard Poets, a new band featuring members of the popular Flailing Shillelaghs, which will present pub-style holiday music with a carol singalong and ?holiday karaoke? ? and free hot chocolate sponsored by Alyssa Cohen Homes ? Forest Hill Real Estate. The first 125 people on site will receive swag bags from local merchants and other surprises from area shops and services.

The following evening ? Sunday, December 15 ? a full day of events will be held aimed at seniors and families, including pet-friendly photo sessions with Santa, a petting zoo from Lionel's Farms, a vintage car show facilitated by York Regional Police and Central York Fire Services, an interactive ornament workshop, and much more.

Businesses that have recently come to call St. Andrew's Village Home are looking forward to the upcoming events and to see them spark renewed interest in the plaza.

Krystal Sandler, who purchased the Body Beautiful Day Spa this past May, says when she was looking into buying a business she was drawn to the plaza because it reminded her of Main Street, Unionville. Six months on, while she loves the space, she believes it ?doesn't live up to its potential.?

?I've been a little disappointed to see it is a bit of a ghost town most of the time,? she said. ?Some residents we'll see walking their dogs around the courtyard, but it's pretty much it. When I first laid eyes on it, I thought, ?This should be a destination where people could go and hang out on a Friday evening,' and I feel this place could be that.?

A similar sentiment was felt by Umair Malik, a teacher who will open up the Equation Hub with his wife on November 30.

?It's a tutoring centre focused on math and we cater from Kindergarten to Grade 12,? he said. ?On Sunday, we plan to have an open house or session where students can come in and get our services completely at no cost for the community, just to spread the word and stuff. I was so close to signing a lease for another place until my agent sent me this listing. It caught my eye, I loved the courtyard, and I love how all the businesses are connected to one another.?

It's a connection they only hope will continue to grow within the courtyard, the wider St. Andrew's Plaza, and Aurora as a whole.

To follow their progress, visit www.facebook.com/groups/24043453715300441.

By Brock Weir