

Song Circle turns over a new leaf on 10th anniversary



By Brock Weir

Even at the age of 21, some performers can be considered veterans in their chosen field.

One man of that certain age, for instance, recently approached the open mic at Jonathan's restaurant.

It was a familiar place for him. He first stepped up to that podium when he was just 11 or 12.

In fact, he was one of the original players and was on hand this summer to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the Jonathan's Song Circle, the come-as-you-are, play-as-you-are Aurora musical tradition, which started off as the brainchild of musician Patty McLaughlin and has, since then, taken on a life of its own. Until a recent, temporary setback.

?It has been a really neat thing to watch these people come out of their shells and it is just so much fun,? says Ms. McLaughlin, who performs regularly with the song circle. We recently had a group of women come in and we started calling them the ukulele ladies. They hadn't played anything their whole lives and they just decided one day to form a ukulele group. They ventured into our song circle one night and many of them still come every week, having branched out into guitar and mandolin without having ever played before. They just discovered a love of music.?

These discoveries are commonplace amongst the growing number of musicians, seasoned and budding, which find their own sense of home and comfort among the circle ? and it is something Ms. McLaughlin is very proud of.

Over a decade ago, Ms. McLaughlin worked as a server at the restaurant. After a particularly busy day, she sat down to do some bookkeeping at the end of the day and began singing to herself. Nothing unusual in that, it should be noted, for someone who was, at that point, already well-established on the local music scene. This was different, however, the acoustics of the restaurant's second-floor room caught her well-trained ear and inspiration struck.

?A music night had always been in the back of my head to foster people's musical skills to bring them on board,? she says.

With the approval of the restaurant owners, it started off as a monthly thing. It started off slow, but through word-of-mouth, the pace began to quicken. What musicians, including musicians-to-be, found was an all-inclusive, supportive environment.

?Most of the egos are checked at the door before they come in and we take turns starting off a song and everybody joins in,? says Ms. McLaughlin.

?Other people who are a little more seasoned also enjoy watching people who are just get going and watch their improvements as they happen. A guy who hadn't played bass for over 20 years happened to be a customer at the restaurant, so he dusted off his bass and got back into it. We have a woman who, at the age of 60, decided she was going to play the fiddle and was going great guns. She has been coming every week and it is a great way to learn, too.

?We have people who come in scared to sing in front of everybody, but I gently tell them they have nothing to lose and can have the mic when they are ready. Out of all this has come new friendships and other things.?

These ?other things? include groups of musicians branching out to perform at the Aurora Farmers' Market, the Rise and Shine Breakfast hosted by Aurora United Church for individuals and families in need, and a real network.

?Over the next 10 years, we just want to meet more musicians,? says Ms. McLaughlin. ?At our anniversary, we had a gentleman who has never played with us before. He came out the week before and scouted us out. We get people sitting in the back corner seeing how it all happens and then nine times out of 10 they come back with their instrument in hand because they realise we're a friendly group.

?The most rewarding part is being part of a motivator to getting people to come out of their shells with their music.?

But, while the Song Circle has provided many happy memories for the musicians that have come in and out of this fluid group, it had to weather something of a storm in recent weeks as Jonathan's closed its doors, leaving them adrift.

You can't keep this group down for long, however. This week, they were warming up their voices, tuning up their guitars, and looking forward to experiencing that camaraderie at the Royal Canadian Legion, the new home base for the song circle.