

Special Olympians "Paint the Town Red!"



By Brock Weir

Local Special Olympians, public employees, and politicians teamed up Thursday to paint York Region red in celebration of the upcoming Special Olympics Summer Games, which hits York Region in July.

The event, organized by York Regional Police, will bring together hundreds of Special Olympics athletes, their families, and countless people to cheer them on in locations spanning all nine York Region Municipalities.

Aurora, for instance, at St. Andrew's College, will be the Games' soccer venue, while a portion of the athletes set up camp in their dorms for the duration of the period.

The Region initially set up a fundraising goal of \$500,000 supporting the games through the sponsorship of individual Ontario athletes, and the sale of red shoelaces which were worn by athletes, politicians, police and first responders, and all York Region Transit drivers on Thursday. This fundraising, however, has exceeded their expectations and they have now upped the ante ? making it a true Daily Double of fundraising to \$1 million.

Olympians descended on the York Regional Headquarters in Newmarket for a celebratory barbeque to raise even more money to support the athletes, meet local dignitaries, and lay some of the groundwork for the upcoming games.

?We're going to have over 900 athletes, coaches, and loved ones of our athletes across Ontario to York Region,? said York Regional Chair Bill Fisch. ?I am very proud to say we have these games, we fought for these games, and we're so pleased to have all of you be in your hometowns to do that.?

York Regional Police Chief Eric Joliffe spoke of his pride not just for the athletes but the various people in his department, including Games Coordinator Karen Richards, that have gone beyond the call of duty, particularly this early in the game, in ensuring the success of July's celebrations, and their proud history of supporting the games, which goes back over 25 years. In this time, including 2013, the York Regional Police is the only police service to host the games twice.

?It is through the entire team's dedication that athletes will have an unbelievable experience in July,? he said.

Athletes also had the chance to meet Dr. Frank Hayden, founder of Special Olympics Canada. In his remarks to the Olympians and their families, he highlighted the history of the games, which had its humble beginnings in a study he undertook researching activities and movement for children with intellectual disabilities in the 1960s.

At that time, that was a particular area where little had been written and he said it quickly became clear how 'unfit' the children were. The writings of he and his team took off, proving there was a market and an influence to do something about it, and his work caught the attention of the U.S.-based Kennedy Foundation including Eunice Kennedy and her husband Sargent Shriver.



(Top) Stephen Retruccelli and Brent Hoey compare red shoelaces, which were donned by Olympians, public workers, and politicians across York Region on Thursday. (Above) York Region Health employee Andy Lee found new and creative ways to show his spirit with the laces. (Auroran photos by Brock Weir)

Dr. Hayden spoke of its early roots in organizing a precursor to the games as a Centennial Celebration and the Shriver's encouraged him to come down and get the ball rolling for a similar initiative south of the border. Although reluctant at first, the persistence of 'Sarge' paid off and the rest is history, spanning the globe, including the recent World Winter Games in South Korea where York Region athletes fared so well.

This is a testament, said Dr. Hayden, to the universality of the games in breaking down barriers of race, culture, and religion.

'We're all the same and it is really you folks who come together, work together, get to know each other, and bring your communities together,' he said. 'That's what made me what I am today - it is by you folks and not by me.'

Representing the athletes on stage with the dignitaries was Matt Nightswander, one of the members of the Newmarket Ringers floor hockey team which returned from South Korea with medals around their necks. He said after going across Ontario, Canada, and to the other side of the world for the Special Olympics, he was looking forward to welcoming athletes from across Ontario to their home turf.

'When I was in school I didn't have a lot of friends, I was picked on a lot, and all I ever wanted was to fit in,' he said. 'I found Special Olympics and it was a true blessing because Special Olympics is not only about sports, it is building confidence, friendship and learning new skills.'

'Special Olympics taught me I could live my dream and I know it can create the same for others.'

For more in the Ontario Summer Games or to support athletes, visit www.specialolympics2013games.com.