

Volunteers celebrated for hard work and dedication at Community Recognition Awards

Volunteers are the lifeblood of every community and their work is perhaps needed now more than ever before as we look for new ways to give back and lend a hand in this present 'new normal' and Aurora found a new way of expressing its gratitude Monday night as the Town hosted the annual Community Recognition Awards.

Traditionally, award winners are welcomed to Town Hall by the Mayor and Council for a special presentation and reception to celebrate their contributions to our community, but 2020 is an extraordinary year and recipients were recognized in a virtual awards show streamed live across the Town's social media channels.

'We recognize the importance of volunteers in our community and we could not miss this opportunity to show our gratitude,' said Mayor Tom Mrakas. 'As we know, it is the people and their contributions that make a community special, in particular the volunteers, who are the heart and soul of our community. Tonight, we are here to celebrate the countless contributions that volunteers have made in keeping Aurora the vibrant and incredible community it continues to be.'

'We are all very familiar that in Aurora 'you're in good company' but this is only possible because of the exceptionally close-knit community we have, which is comprised of remarkable individuals. I would like to say thank you to those that took the time to nominate these volunteers. We all know they don't volunteer to be recognized, but it is special when it happens.'

'Without our volunteers, our community wouldn't have the sports organizations, community events, engaging arts and cultural activities that contribute to making Aurora, in my opinion, one of the best communities in all of Canada. We all know the saying 'life is short' and that is because time is one of our most precious resources. Volunteers bring their talents, skills, passion, enthusiasm, experience and leadership skills, but it is their time that they give. Every time you choose to volunteer, you give up your time to visit with friends and family and to do normal everyday activities. Your choice to volunteer and give back to your community is incredibly selfless.'

YOUTH VOLUNTEER AWARD ? KARSEN ROY

Country Day School student Karsen Roy has been presented with the 2020 Youth Volunteer Award.

The Youth Volunteer Award is presented to a citizen up to the age of 19 who has demonstrated their commitment for being a positive leader within the community.

?Karsen Roy is an exemplary youth that cares deeply about her community,? said Mayor Mrakas. ?She has accumulated more than 220 community service hours by contributing to a variety of programs and projects. She is a high-level athlete that spends a lot of time volunteering with various groups like the special needs soccer program and the younger Panthers team. She has supported organizations like Me to We, Run for the Cure, and was one of the original members of the Country Day School Cares Team [comprised of] students and faculty members who organize school-wide food and non-food donation drives and deliver homemade lunches to the homeless.?

In addition, Karsen has served as House Captain for the Relay for Life Fundraiser, where the team raised more than \$20,000 for the Canadian Cancer Society.

?To say she is an engaged student is an understatement. Karsen is a positive role model for young people and is the type of person who wants everyone to feel included. Karsen spreads sunshine and positivity wherever she goes. Not only is she a wonderful role model for young people, she reminds all generations that our hearts do not have a limit, and that ?giving? is an action that never runs dry.?

SENIOR VOLUNTEER AWARD ? GARY KRYSHKA

Gary Kryshka, who received the 40-Year Volunteer Service award earlier on Monday evening, took home a second honour, being awarded the Senior Volunteer Award for his more than 40 years of service with Big Brothers Big Sisters of York.

Through the mentorship organization, Kryshka has served as a Director, Treasurer, and now as Board Chair.

?The organization's mentoring program matches children and young people with a uniquely suited role model to talk to and share common interests with,? said Mayor Mrakas. ?With the support of their volunteer mentors, children are able to increase their self confidence, enhance social skills, and engage in new experiences within the community. Gary currently sits as the agency's chair and over the course of 40 years, [he] has changed many people's lives with his volunteerism. Gary has seen the agency through some ups and downs, never losing faith in the cause and the work they are doing.?

GREEN AWARD ? OLIVIA SCOTT

11-year-old Olivia Scott has a passion for keeping Aurora clean and beautiful ? and her efforts have been recognized with the Green Award, which is presented to individuals or organizations that support protection, preservation, sustainability and conservation of the natural environment.

?Tonight, we present the Green Award to Olivia Scott for her endless commitment to keeping Aurora a clean and beautiful place to live,? said

Mayor Mrakas. ?Along with her family, Olivia regularly participates in community-wide clean-ups in green spaces around her home. She encourages neighbours and community members to get involved and care for the natural environment around them.

?Olivia brings her passion for preserving nature to her school, where she implements her knowledge in every day learning. Her example inspires other students, they are more aware of recycling habits and use less single-use plastics.

?I met Olivia last year when she came to me with her concerns about Aurora's garbage management methods. I invited her and her friends to come to Aurora Town Hall to discuss the matter more. I was pleasantly surprised by how passionate and dedicated Olivia was in making a difference in her community. At only 11-years-old, she has demonstrated initiative and leadership.?

ARTS & CULTURE AWARD ? THEATRE AURORA

For more than 60 years, Theatre Aurora has been bringing live theatre to the community ? and this year, they are recognized with the Arts & Culture Award, an accolade inspired by the Johnson Family, honouring individuals and groups who have enhanced the community through their support of culture, music, visual, performing or literary arts.

?Theatre Aurora is entirely [comprised] of volunteers who not only work on stage as actors but also in other areas behind the curtain,? said Mayor Mrakas. ?Theatre Aurora has a Youth Program dedicated to educating young people in theatre arts and providing opportunities to take on roles based on their interest and skill level. Theatre Aurora is committed to fostering and sustaining a respectful space where theatre lovers can thrive, learn and grow together.

?Theatre Aurora spreads inspiration, education and entertainment for those who are friends of the theatre. Thank you for your continual artistic contributions to the vitality and culture of Aurora.?

COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP ? (Tie) STEVE FALK, OPTIMIST CLUB OF AURORA

The Community Leadership Award is presented to an individual or organization that has ?significantly enhanced the Town through their contribution, commitment and leadership in areas of charitable giving, civic engagement, community events or community spirit.? This year, the Community Leadership Award has been presented to both an individual and organization ? a tie between Steve Falk and the Optimist Club of Aurora.

?Steve Falk is a generous and caring individual who cares deeply about the wellbeing of his community members,? said Mayor Mrakas, highlighting Mr. Falk's work at Aurora United Church, its Rise & Shine breakfast program, and his band, Soul Benefit, which donates its time to community

causes. To date, it is estimated that Soul Benefit has raised over \$2 million for charity over the past 20 years. By example, Steve expects members to display generosity, kindness, loyalty, and commitment to each other, as well as to the greater community.

By nature, Steve has influenced countless youth and adults he has met over his lifetime. His motto in life is to serve to see where there is a need and, in some way, to then fill that need.

The Optimist Club of Aurora shares a similar philosophy, dedicating their energies to youth programs across Aurora.

The Optimist Club of Aurora has been involved in youth activities, youth-oriented programs and Town of Aurora activities for the last 35 years. All of the funds they raise go directly back to the youth of Aurora. The Club has been innovative and has developed many different programs to meet the needs of the youth in Aurora. Almost all youth in the Town of Aurora have, at some point, been positively affected by the efforts of the Optimist Club.

GOOD NEIGHBOUR AWARD ? SAM PAPUTSIS

Recognizing simple acts of kindness and compassion, this year's recipient of the Good Neighbour Award is Sam Paputsis, who is described as a compassionate, kind, generous and thoughtful person towards all of his neighbours.

Sam helps his neighbours regularly by shovelling their driveways, mowing their lawns, and keeping an eye on things while they are away on holiday. But, on top of this help, Sam provides his neighbours with unconditional and invaluable emotional support. For example, one of Sam's neighbours had surgery where they could not drive for a month. Sam was there regularly at their doorstep to take them for a drive and to get a coffee. Sam is a handyman where if you need something fixed or if your tire needs air, he'll just jump there to lend a helping hand. Sam never expects any of his good deeds to be rewarded as he is a genuinely kind-hearted, caring individual. Everyone should have a neighbour like Sam on their street.

COMMUNITY SAFETY AWARD ? Luka Miljanov

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Grade 11 student Luka Milkanov has harnessed the power of his homemade 3D printers to create face shields and other PPE for frontline healthcare workers. In recognition of his work, the Town of Aurora has honoured him with the Community Safety Award, which is presented to individuals dedicated to improving community safety.

He is building 3D printed masks from polyacid to donate to long-term care facilities in Aurora. Over the March Break, Luka learned about the shortages of PPE. So, he readjusted his machine to print face shields in just one hour instead of 12 hours.

?Luka analysed the situation and thought to himself, ?How can I help? What can I do?' and, from there, he got busy with printing. He has been sharing his production with Chartwell Aurora and Chartwell Hollandview Trail. So far, he has made 40 masks and is striving to make 100 in total.

GOOD BUSINESS AWARD ? JOE ANSELMO, AURORA HARVEY'S/SWISS CHALET

The Good Business Award is presented to a business that has shown its commitment to corporate responsibility and community involvement through its ongoing support of charitable causes and programs. Exemplifying that this year is Joe Anselmo of Harvey's and Swiss Chalet.

?Joe has gone out of his way to contribute to the community in any way he or his restaurant can. For the past three years, Harvey's Swiss Chalet has provided 250 free meals to the Welcoming Arms organization during the Christmas holiday. The restaurant is a huge supporter of recreational sports as they have sponsored soccer and baseball teams in Aurora. They have also hosted hockey and sports parties for teams for free, which include their food, drinks, décor, and facility at no charge. ?Joe has not only contributed to the community, but also to local businesses. In 2017, Joe started an initiative on Facebook called Aurora Restaurant News where the group is dedicated to sharing updates and promotions from local restaurants in Aurora. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, [the company] started to offer healthcare workers 50 per cent off their meals thanking them for all the hard work they have been doing to keep our community safe.?

He was also recognized for his efforts with the Run 4 Schools program, helping to provide student lunches for a nominal fee, as well as his fundraising work with the Heart & Stroke Foundation.

INCLUSIVITY AWARD ? LISA LEONI

Lisa Leoni, Principal of Regency Acres Public School, has been recognized with the 2020 Inclusivity Award, an honour reserved for individuals, groups or businesses who contribute to making Aurora a more accessible place for all to live, work and play.

Ms. Leoni has been honoured for her dedication in creating an inclusive school environment where inclusivity, respect and kindness are the orders of the day.

?Lisa recognizes that it is crucial for her students to have a positive mindset, so she initiated the mindfulness room. This is a dedicated space to support students' mental health and social wellbeing through the day at school. For physical health, Lisa has partnered with Activate Aurora as they co-organize community events such as Pause to Play. Lisa supports their school's initiative for the snack cart, where students can access healthy snack items throughout the day as many of them might not have access to breakfast in the morning. The program also has no stigma around it, so students feel comfortable getting food when they need it.

?When the school has new families, she shares community supports and services that will visit them in their homes, help them with language barriers and assist with navigating community services. Lisa wants to make [her students] well-versed and familiar with social justice topics. Indigenous education has been expanded upon incorporating [recommendations from the Truth & Reconciliation Commission] and the LGBTQ2S+ community is recognized and discussed openly at the school. Regency Acres has the first ever elementary Gender Sexuality Alliance, which was initiated to support this marginalized group.?

By Brock Weir