

Volunteers hailed as 'essence' of community at annual Awards Ceremony



Local heroes were in the spotlight on Monday night as the Town of Aurora hosted the 2024 Community Recognition Awards at Town Hall.

Each year, the Community Recognition Awards honour Aurora residents who have tirelessly given back to the Town they call home.

This year's event was once again emceed by Mayor Tom Mrakas, in the presence of Council who presented the individual awards, who hailed the evening's honourees as the 'essence' of what Aurora truly is.

'It is undeniable that the essence of any community lies in its people, especially the volunteers who are its beating heart,' said Mayor Mrakas. 'Tonight, we gather to honour the countless contributions of these volunteers whose dedication keeps Aurora a vibrant and extraordinary place.'

'We are fortunate to have so many generous individuals who call Aurora home and are deeply grateful to our volunteers for their countless positive contributions to the lives of their fellow Aurorans. Volunteers enhance our community and play a vital role in mentoring others, supporting charitable causes, coordinating sport leagues and cultural programs, and organizing key initiatives that benefit our Town and its residents. They are the glue that holds the bricks of our community together.'

Following presentations to numerous volunteers who were honoured for the years they have been involved in community life ' 25, 30, 35, 40 and 50 years ' individual awards began with a presentation of the Youth Volunteer Award.

Youth Volunteer Award DABRIA PETA-DRAGOS

The Youth Volunteer Award is presented each year to a young citizen who has made a 'significant contribution' to the community and has demonstrated leadership. Peta-Dragos was hailed for her nearly 350 volunteer hours accumulated over the last three years with organizations as varied as the Aurora Community Arboretum, Neighbourhood Network, Aurora Public Library, Toronto General Hospital and Chartwell Retirement Homes, in addition to her role as co-chair of the Town's Youth Engagement Committee. 'In her role as President of the York Secondary Catholic Presidents' Council, Dabria advocates for students and initiates impactful projects, such as 'Plant a Tree with Us!' and 'Secret Santa' presents for Indigenous children,' read her citation. 'Her organizational skills and commitment to enhancing youth experiences make her an exemplary youth leader.'

Older Adult Volunteer Award ALEX & RIN VAN HEMERT

Dedicated volunteers at Southlake Regional Health Centre for more than a quarter of a century, the Van Hemerts were honoured with the Older Adult Volunteer Award, which is presented each year to an individual or individuals who have made a significant contribution to their community. 'Alex and Rin have served Southlake Hospital for 25 years, bringing comfort to patients and staff. Additionally, both of them have volunteered at various organizations such as the York Regional Police Chorus, Salvation Army,

Northridge Community Church and more. Their volunteering and commitment continue to have a positive impact on the community. They help wherever they see a need. Both are kind and lovely people and truly are a great asset to the Aurora Community.?

Green Award DONNA LEWIS

A familiar face at community events in her eye-catching monarch butterfly-inspired outfit, Donna Lewis of the Garden Aurora is this year's Green Award honouree, which is presented each year to those who support the ?protection, preservation, sustainability or conservation of our natural environment.? In her citation, she was hailed as a ?leading advocate? in the community both within her role with Garden Aurora and well beyond. ?Donna educates families on eco-friendly gardening at local events such as the Aurora Farmers' Market where I saw her recently and works with the Aurora Historical Society on sustainable landscaping for Hillary House,? said Mayor Mrakas. ?Her dedication to environmental stewardship makes her an outstanding recipient of the Green Award.?

Arts & Culture Award ROSA CALABRESE

Since transforming the former Caruso's just south of Yonge and Wellington into the Royal Rose Art Gallery, the space has become nothing short of a community hub ? and this was recognized by the Town as gallery owner Rosa Calabrese was awarded the 2024 Arts & Culture Award. The Award is presented to an individual or group that has enhanced our community through their support or promotion of culture, music, visual, performing or the literary arts. ?Rosa Calabrese has enriched Aurora's arts scene with the Royal Rose Gallery, a hub for cultural exchange and community engagement,? reads her citation. ?Her leadership shines through diverse events, Indigenous art celebrations and the gallery's youth arts program. Rosa champions social narratives live women's rights in Iran and Canada's Indigenous traditions.?

Community Leadership Award COMMUNITY LIVING CENTRAL YORK

The Community Leadership Award is presented to individuals or organizations that have ?significantly enhanced the Town through their contribution, commitment and leadership in the areas of charitable giving, civic engagement, community events or community spirit.? This year's honouree is Community Living Central York, which has been supporting people living with developmental disabilities for more than 70 years. ?Their literacy, cooking, wellness and employment programs help more than 400 people each year,? reads their citation. ?Additionally, they provide people the opportunity to experience a variety of leisure activities, and their associate family program is a residential option that provides caring home environments. By adapting to community needs, Community Living Central York offers programs that promote inclusion and empowerment.?

Good Neighbour Award DAVID NISBET

The Good Neighbour Award is presented each year recognizing the simple acts of kindness and compassion that helps create connected and vibrant neighbourhoods. This year's honouree, David Nisbet, was hailed for his ?community stewardship? at St. Andrew's Valley Golf Course on St. John's Sideroad. ?Each winter, he opens the club to the public and personally clears snow from the parking lot and paths, creating a space for dog walking, skiing, and snowshoeing,? reads his citation. ?David's dedication transforms the golf course into a cherished community resource, fostering neighbourhood connections and encouraging outdoor activities for all.?

Good Business Award COBS BREAD

Cobs Bread's commitment to supporting the community programs and initiatives led to their being named the 2024 Good Business Award honouree. This award is presented each year to a business that has ?shown its commitment to corporate responsibility and community involvement through its ongoing support of charitable causes, events and programs.? COBS Bread owners Bhavin and Nidhi were saluted for their support of groups ranging from Aurora Storm Volleyball to Welcoming Arms, to CHATS (Community & Home Assistance to Seniors) and John Cooper Learning Academy. ?Since acquiring the store pre-pandemic, they've donated over

\$450,000 annually in products and hosted charity barbecues. They also give unsold bakery items to Welcoming Arms and the Salvation Army daily. Their commitment as residents and business owners demonstrates their dedication to Aurora's well-being.?

Inclusivity Award CHATS (COMMUNITY & HOME ASSISTANCE TO THE COMMUNITY)

Year in and year out, CHATS and its volunteers have worked tirelessly to serve the senior community ? and this year, their collective dedication saw CHATS named the recipient of the 2024 Inclusivity Award, which recognizes an individual, group or business that has contributed to making Aurora ?a more accessible and inclusive place to live, work and play for all people.? CHATS, according to the citation, promotes inclusivity through diverse outreach programs in multiple languages, serving the Iranian, Russian, Korean, Italian, South Asian and Tamil communities. ?These programs foster social interaction, cultural celebrations, and offer resources in preferred languages. CHATS helps to inspire older adults to discover the possibilities of aging at home longer, and they help empower caregivers to look after themselves, so they can better provide compassionate assistance for those they care for.?

By Brock Weir