

## Winterfresh event raises \$60,000 for York Region Food Network, Community



The community came together to take a serious bite out of food insecurity on Saturday, February 28, as the York Region Food Network hosted their signature fundraiser of the year, Winterfresh.

The annual trivia night, which was held at the Stonehaven Banquet Hall, was not just a fun way to raise much-needed funds for the York Region Food Network (YRFN) and its many programs, but it was also a celebration of the YRFN's 40th anniversary as community advocates and difference-makers when it comes to food insecurity.

"This year, our goal was \$60,000 and we hit that goal in a huge way," says YRFN's Joanne Witt.

As the night unfolded, hosted by quizmaster Javed Khan, attendees saw the "mercury" in the fundraising thermometer get ever-closer to the goal. After the fundraising "booze pull", silent and live auctions and more, they had raised an impressive \$57,000.

But that wasn't the end of the story.

"When we announced we were at \$57,000, [past Aurora Citizen of the Year] Vern Cunningham raised his hand and said, "We're not leaving until we hit this goal. I'll donate \$500," Witt recalls, noting it started a wave of informal fundraising on the floor. "People just started reaching into their purses, wallets, waving cash in the air, some had credit cards to make donations so we didn't leave the night without hitting \$60,000. When we hit \$3,000, the room just exploded with people standing, cheering, arms in the air. It was such an amazing feeling of community coming together."

They certainly reached their \$60,000 goal and, since the event wrapped, donations have continued to roll in "and every dollar counts.

"Sixty-thousand is a huge amount and we can do so much with that money," says Witt. "We are so frugal with every dollar because we know every dollar that we spend means a dollar worth of food that we weren't able to pass on to somebody who needs it. We're so cautious about every penny that we spend. That \$60,000 is going to go so far not just in being able to continue on with the food programs that we have, but [help] our Good Food Box."

The YRFN's funding for the Good Food Box ran out last year, she explains, and since then they have been exploring other ways to get similar products to the hands of individuals and families who need them in different ways.

The money raised at Winterfresh will go a long way in making this a reality, she says, and will also support their Affordable Fresh Food Markets, which they host monthly in various locations throughout York Region, including at the Salvation Army and Welcoming Arms here in Aurora.

'We're always looking at other programs and services we want to introduce. One thing I love about this organization is the fact that we're very responsive to what people tell us we need, and that's where the programs come from. We don't just make programs up and then try to put them out there hoping it's what people need,' she says. 'We are constantly talking to people we're supporting [asking], can we improve this service for you? Is this what you need? Is this what you're looking for? That's how some of these things like the Affordable Fresh Food Market actually came out of our participants in the Good Food Box program. People could order [the boxes] when they came to Aurora to pick them up, but we started to get feedback from people in, say, Georgina or Markham who didn't know whether it was really worth it anymore with the cost of gas and everything else to drive up here to pick up the Good Food Box and go back home. The Good Food Boxes would be based on seasonal fruits and vegetables and what donations were coming into us, so people didn't get to pick what was in the Good Food Box. Sometimes we wouldn't even know, so people would be ordering the Good Food Box and not necessarily knowing what's in it unless they were following what's in season.'

'The Affordable Fresh Food Markets came out of that in two ways: being able to give people an opportunity to shop for the items that they want - this way they can come and 'shop' for the things that they need in their own neighbourhood. We created that program to have the Markets available for people right in their own communities and giving them an option to choose what they want as opposed to the Good Food Box. Some people still love the mystery of the Good Food Box and other people prefer the Affordable Fresh Food Market, but the great thing is we're constantly talking to and listening to the people that we support to see what they need, and then we look at program and service creation based on that.'

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