

Women leaders honoured by Minister and MPP



By Brock Weir

Leading women and leading girls are not only leading each other, they are setting a 'powerful' example to women and men alike on how to make our society 'fair and inclusive.'

This was the view shared by Newmarket-Aurora MPP Chris Ballard on Thursday night as he and Tracy MacCharles, Ontario's Minister Responsible for Women's Issues, brought together 10 outstanding local women living up to that philosophy and improving the lives of Newmarket-Aurora residents across the board.

Held at the Aurora Cultural Centre, Thursday's gathering was part of Ontario's Leading Women/Leading Girls Building Communities awards program, which is designed to recognize and salute female trailblazers.

And the trails each recipient continues to blaze are far reaching, whether it is ensuring members of the communities around them have enough to eat, are able to escape domestic violence, are well-equipped to get back into the workforce after certain setbacks, have clothes on their back, are able to get back on their feet after debilitating illness, or they set out bettering the world around them, including revitalizing flagging business districts, or sprucing the place up, one tree and shrub at a time.

'It is an important time to recognize the political, economic and social achievements of women and girls both here at home and around the world,' said Mr. Ballard. 'When we look through our community's history, we see women and girls who have blazed trails. We see strong women who have stood up for their families, their communities, and for other women. And, we see young women wise beyond their years who have advocated for change and worked to make their communities better for everyone.'

'Leading women are not just leading girls. They are also leading boys and men and set a powerful example for all of us in making our society fair and inclusive.'

Minister MacCharles agreed, citing recent legislation put forward by the Ontario Government leading to an action plan to stop sexual violence and harassment and change the norms and beliefs that surround those situations.

'Only when we can all live free from fear of violence can men and women alike reach their full potential,' she said. 'I am proud to be here to pay tribute to people who are not only thriving, but helping others so they can be a vital part of their community. Often people talk about how as a society we become less caring and more selfish, but I think every person in this room is a testament to how that is really not true. We recognize as a government how selflessly you have done so much without asking for formal recognition. These are people who have touched our lives and I know will continue to be a role model in your community.'

One of Thursday's recipients, Nancy Croxford, knows all too well the benefits that can come from living free of violence. As a dedicated volunteer at Aurora's Yellow Brick House women's shelter for over a decade, she established a foundation that supports initiatives to stop violence against women in its tracks, while providing her with the expertise to branch out into a top fundraiser for the organization.

"Her passion for assisting women and children is driven by her strong belief that everyone deserves to live with dignity and integrity and be free from violence," read Ms. Croxford's citation.

Living in dignity is a quest that has dominated Kristine Carbis' work as the membership secretary for the Newmarket-Aurora chapter of Freedom 90, which focuses on raising awareness of people dependant on food banks across Ontario. Travelling across Southern Ontario, she is dedicated to finding solutions to feeding less fortunate families, including women and children.

As a member of Aurora's Gathering Place for over 15 years, Ellen Campbell was recognized for her Queen of the Day annual event where local women facing difficult circumstances are treated to a stylist and given the clothes they need to go on job interviews.

Single women still trying to get back on their feet will soon have a place to stay thanks in no small part to Jackie Playter, an active volunteer who helped raise \$1 million for the upcoming Belinda's Place Women's Shelter in Newmarket. In addition to her work on the shelter, Ms. Playter was saluted for her work as Chair of the Downtown Newmarket Business Improvement Area, which has overseen the redevelopment of the old business area into a vibrant, flourishing hub of commerce and culture.

For nearly 20 years, Susan Lanthier-Doyle has been doing her work in Aurora's own Cultural Hub, dedicating her time to Welcoming Arms, which operates out of the rectory at Trinity Anglican Church. She also volunteers with Aurora's St. Vincent de Paul mission, helping to provide women with the information they need to navigate the social services system for employment, health care, and children's support, using home visits to provide "guidance, encouragement and compassion."

Tammy Farbod too lives by these three pillars. An active member in Aurora's Canadian-Iranian community, she has spearheaded a weekly program for "isolated Canadian-Iranian seniors" allowing them to access classes for both English and exercise, while providing an opportunity to forge peer connections.

Peer connections are vital for Leah Hans, who has worked with the York Region office of Girls Incorporated to empower local girls and young women in finding their voice. In addition to her work at Girls Inc., she is a filmmaker volunteering with YouthSpeak on a campaign to strip bullies of the masks they wear.

As a student, Emily Li also forges this message of empowerment through her school's Social Justice Council encouraging students to be aware of the issues around them, as chair of their Free the Children Club, and working on the individual level to help and encourage young girls to make a difference in their communities.

Through their work with the Canadian Cancer Society, Janice Hodgson and Nancee Webb are often given the opportunities to work with these young women, whether it is through the society's annual Daffodil Campaign or the myriad Relay for Life events slated for this spring and summer.

Ms. Hodgson was honoured for her 15-years' work with the Society and her advocacy work for prevention, screening and living a healthy lifestyle. Her work with the Red Cross and Girl Guides of Canada was also recognized.

Ms. Webb is instrumental in the local Daffodil Campaign each March. While countless plastic daffodils dotting lapels across the community can be traced back to her, so too can real daffodils in the Aurora Community Arboretum where she recruits volunteers to take part in their annual Community Spring Cleanup and assist with planting over 1,000 trees and shrubs annually.