



Character community

By Kim Zarzour

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It was enough to make you wonder what you've been doing your entire life.

A steady stream of amazing people filed across the stage at Richmond Hill's Centre for the Performing Arts Tuesday during the York Region's Character Community Awards gala. Attendees heard a dizzying array of uplifting stories — children who donate their chore money for charity, teenagers who assist senior citizens and raise money for cancer research, and hundreds of schools, businesses and average citizens who help out locally or globally with seniors, sick children, the environment and their next-door neighbours.

These inspiring people were referred to as "everyday superheroes" who do small but important deeds day in and day out to make York Region a better place.

They are the kind of quiet heroes who often go unrecognized, but the Character Community Foundation of York Region — a group of volunteers and leaders from the community, government, education and business sectors — has decided to celebrate them in a big way with the hopes that good deeds can be contagious.

"We practise and promote a simple, but important philosophy," emcee Jeff Moore told that gathering of 550 people. "When people and communities embrace living with character, we can change the world we live in for the better."

The School of Character Award, presented to schools that creates sustainable character development initiatives, went to St. Joan of Arc Catholic High School, St. Emily Catholic School, Rogers Public School, Rosedale Heights Public School and Country Day School. The schools all demonstrated they are working on issues such as bullying, cancer, Christmas food and gift drives and fundraising for global projects.

Dave Heard, an Aurora resident who overcame heartbreaking abuse and bullying to make a positive change in his community earned rousing applause as he accepted the Social Justice Award. Mr. Heard started a free breakfast program and bread network with the food pantry, provides fresh weekly produce to the food pantry, does a variety of volunteer work and champions the Aurora Spirit Walk.

With the "heart of a lion ... he has shown tremendous courage and beaten the odds and is a community role model to youth and struggling adults," the evening's co-host, Katie Mobbs, said.

Jade Scognamilo's accomplishments drew an appreciative gasp as the 16-year-old was awarded the Wendel Clark Sports Award. The Country Day School student raised more than \$50,000 to purchase a new infant incubator at Toronto's Sick Kids Hospital with her record-setting swim across Lake Ontario in 19 hours, 59 minutes. In another fundraising effort in 2008, she broke and still holds records for the youngest and fastest swim across Lake Erie.

For demonstrating responsibility and flexibility in leadership at St. Joan of Arc Catholic High School in Maple, Theresa Calderone was the recipient of the Pursuing Character through the Arts Award.

York Region Media Group was the proud recipient of the Business of Character Award in the for-profit category, recognized for contributions to the United Way, Relay for Life, Dragon Boat race, for helping more than 130 needy families through the 2009 Santa Fund, supporting all three York Region hospitals and involvement in numerous other boards, associations and charities.

In the non-profit category, the Business of Character Award went to Community Living Newmarket-Aurora District, which supports people with developmental disabilities. Community Living clients held a random acts of kindness week, buying coffee for York Region transit drivers and delivering gift baskets to police and fire stations.

As well, four clients travelled to the Olympics with their support workers to act as official volunteers after



Me? Really?. Health care worker Helen Galaris is surprised by her win as EMS head Brian Hall smiles. *Staff Photo/Steve Somerville*

fundraising to cover the cost of the trip.

Yee Hong Centre for Geriatric Care in Markham won in the Service Organization category for demonstrating character in its treatment of seniors, staff and the broader community, opening its doors to seniors of other cultures when Markhaven Home for Seniors had to close temporarily.

Tom Ingersoll was heralded for showing optimism and initiative in his longtime involvement with the Community Safety Village and membership on the board of directors for Crime Stoppers of York Region.

Bluestone Bistro in Unionville, with staff representing the entire community, cultures, faiths and all age groups, accepted the Customer Service of Character Award.

The foundation also chose to honour John Havercroft for his outstanding work in championing the character community movement through schools and communities in York Region and across Ontario.