

Volunteers are the spokes of the community wheel?



MARK PAVILONS

It's been said that the world is hugged by the faithful arms of volunteers. That sentiment was evident last week as King Township recognized the efforts of citizens at the annual Volunteer Appreciation Night. Heralded as Mayor Pellegrini's most favourite event of the year in King, local givers were in the spotlight, shining brightly. They were nominated by their peers, organizations and those touched by their efforts. It's likely that none of the volunteers themselves asked for recognition. It's just what they do. Bill Clinton once said volunteering is 'an act of heroism' and George W. Bush noted volunteers are 'citizens in the fullest sense.' All true. As a bit of an 'outsider,' I was humbled to receive an award for non-resident, nominated by the King Township Food Bank. I have been acting as MC for its annual Sip & Savour fundraiser for more than 10 years now. I have also helped secure donations to help boost their coffers. It's funny, because I wasn't a 'career volunteer' before coming to King. Sure, I had my favourite charities and causes, but upon my arrival here I was immediately struck by the small but mighty Food Bank, led by a handful of volunteers, operating out of various nooks and crannies. It was their heart, their intestinal fortitude, that impressed me. Not one to shy away from trying something new, I accepted the role of MC at the annual gala without a second thought. Sure, in the first few years, I was really nervous, and I still get jitters before every event. And then I remember why I'm at the podium, behind the microphone. I'm surrounded by like-minded individuals whose priority is giving back. How can anyone say no to that? I also recall, vividly, when I first started at the King Weekly Sentinel, being told that Carol Ann Trabert was someone I had to meet. Winning her approval would not be easy, I was told. I believe I worked hard to earn her trust and respect. I hope I have done the same with all other organizations in King that serve the community. I don't really consider my contributions all that special. I do what I can. But isn't that what every volunteer does, without even thinking about it? At the volunteer evening, it was also a bit strange being in front of the camera. My usual perch is behind it, looking through the lens, framing the moments. To be honest, I don't like having my photo taken. And with regards to going above and beyond for groups like the Food Bank, I think that's important for a community newspaper. Our role is to not simply report events and cast a critical eye at decision-makers. More importantly, it's to further the well being of the community. And that means providing awareness, promotion and support to any and all community groups, service clubs, sports groups, arts organizations and more. I hope that my work has carved a niche where the Sentinel is not just a vehicle, but is completely imbedded within the fabric of the community. People often ask whether newspapers are in jeopardy or on their way out. I always respond 'absolutely not.' Where else can you read about your local council, hockey team, curling club and environmental efforts? Few other legitimate media offer the attention, respect and knowledge as your local paper. We're also led by a small, committed team, and local ownership. We're easy to reach and quite literally, our doors are always open. In a world of insta-bites and virtual blurbs, isn't it nice to sit at your kitchen table with a coffee or bagel, and spread out the pages of the Sentinel at your leisure? Okay, some have complained our pages are too big. But you can never have too big of a heart or be too big a when it comes to the community. I smiled when Mayor Pellegrini mentioned in his remarks that I am considered an 'honourary citizen.' Love it! I consider King my new home town. It feels good, like that favourite pair of jeans or those well worn summer sandals that you simply refuse to get rid of! I also vividly remember attending my first King council meeting, and receiving a surprisingly warm

welcome from the mayor, councillors and staff. That genuine nature made it easy to "fit in" and get comfortable with King. I never felt like an "outsider." I'd like to think I helped the municipality build momentum and gain traction, in the eyes of the taxpayers. Bringing their work to light and shining that positive beam on municipal efforts, brings everyone together. Now, it's hard to keep up with King. It's like a freight train of innovation, progress, success and achievement. I am constantly amazed at how such a relatively small municipality can create things like a modern municipal building, state-of-the-art library and seniors' centre and cutting edge recreation centre, all within a few short years. With limited resources, this Township has become a shining example of the best of small town Ontario and what communities can accomplish. Of course, we all need a little help along the way. They say no one has made it through life without someone else's help. That is true in government, and community-based volunteering. "You can study government and politics in school, but the best way to really understand the process is to volunteer your time." And it's so easy in King. Volunteers and the organizations they represent welcome you with open arms. Mahatma Gandhi once said that "the best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others." As the population ages, the need for volunteers is more pressing. While most volunteers are shy about receiving praise, the annual event in King is an amazing, special presentation, put together by a great team of people at the Township. As one councillor said, "it's the right thing to do." Indeed. And so is our penchant to serve. "Those who can, do. Those who can do more, volunteer."