Honoring Mr. Michael E. O’Connor

Thursday April 30, 2020 5:30p.m.
Bellevue Country Club

Presenting Sponsor: Dr. Lawrence Stewart

Mr. & Mrs. Michael O’Connor
Disability Awareness “Takes Flight”

AURORA is proud to represent the disability community as a member of the Airport Accessibility Committee, spearheaded by Syracuse Hancock International Airport and lead by Hancock’s ADA/Title VI Coordinator, Debi Marshall. The Committee has been meeting quarterly for the past year. Representatives from airport management, the airlines, TSA, parking staff, security, concessions, other tenants, and volunteers from AURORA and the local disability community all convene to address the quality of the patron experience and accessibility for passengers, visitors, and employees with disabilities. The committee’s focus has been to provide updates on on-going compliance/best practices issues, getting feedback and prioritizing issues for 2020.

Currently the airport is experiencing double-digit growth according to airport Executive Director, Jason Terreri, with this past August being the busiest month in three decades with 250,000 people using the airport. Some recent accomplishments by Syracuse Regional Airport Authority have been instituting a therapy dog program at the airport, offering a Wings for All program to assist families to become familiar with the flight experience, installing hearing loops at the ticket counters, and providing Sorenson Video Relay Service. TSA also provides an escort program. The airport is also making diversity and inclusion in workforce development a part of their upcoming strategic plan. Priorities for the Airport Accessibility Committee in 2020 include addressing curbside assistance issues, making all forms of media and communication more accessible, and improving disability awareness and sensitivity training for the entire workforce at the airport.

We look forward to tackling these priorities together and commend the leadership of the airport and its tenants for their attention and commitment to making the airport user friendly for people of all abilities.
Meet our 2020 Honorary Chair

Michael E. O’Connor has been a friend and “fixture” at AURORA since the mid-1970’s when his father recruited him fresh out of the Syracuse University College of Law (JD1974) to be a member of Syracuse Host Lion’s Club. That membership led him to involvement in The Lighthouse, the predecessor of AURORA. He became a member of the board of The Lighthouse and eventually Chairman of the Board. Since that time, he has served as President four times and helped AURORA successfully negotiate two mergers.

He is currently an active and involved board member. Michael’s personable style, high level of competence and willingness to jump into any situation to help, have greatly contributed to the long-term success of our organization. Debra Chaiken, AURORA’s President, remarks that Michael’s “commitment and leadership have inspired and motivated both staff and other board members. He is a true champion of AURORA’s mission.”

When Michael was asked why he has been involved with AURORA for so long, he explained, “Very early on, I saw the importance of the mission to the people. Hearing those who deliver the services of AURORA and those whose lives are dramatically improved by those services, I can see the “face” of AURORA in everyone. It’s like saving a life!”

Michael has truly been a lifesaver for AURORA and our mission. We are grateful that he continues to share his time and talent with us in so many ways, in the midst of his still busy life. Mike continues to practice as an expert in the field of estate planning with Costello, Cooney and Fearon and is a Fellow of the American College of Trust and Estate Council. He has held numerous professional leadership posts both locally and state-wide and has been recognized nationally in Who’s Who in American Law and Who’s Who in America.

Philanthropically, Michael has also served on the Board of Directors of the Central New York Community Foundation when he is not pursuing his other passion, photography. He has received awards for his work, which remains a hobby intentionally so that he can capture some of his favorite subjects, including his grandchildren and many sought-after scenes of Onondaga Park. With no signs of slowing down, Michael enjoys traveling with his wife Maggie and family time with his three adult children and six grandchildren.

Congratulations and thank you, Michael, for your dedication to AURORA of CNY!
Spotlight On: Carlton Strail, a Man of Many Talents

At 91 years young, Carlton Strail remains a thoughtful and influential advocate who enjoys the respect of many as a leader in the Deaf community. You may not know that he had more than one successful career: as a cook at Syracuse University, meeting the challenge to feed 5,000 hungry collegians, and as a valued Merchandising Supervisor at Chappell’s Department Store. He was featured in many news articles as a pioneering force for Deaf rights and was involved in the founding of the Deaf Advocacy Council locally. He taught First Aid across the state and was active in statewide advocacy, participating in the New York State Commission for the Deaf before it was dismantled in the 1970’s.

Carlton credits his relatives, and uncles especially, with his ability to communicate and negotiate with people from many points of view. They argued all the time about politics and he grew up learning how to respect the needs of others, especially politicians, so that he could work positively with them. In fact, throughout his upbringing, Carlton engaged regularly with both the hearing and Deaf worlds. His grandmother invented her own sign language (referred to as Home Sign). Both his parents were Deaf; his dad used ASL and his mom learned the Rochester method (fingerspelling everything). This exposure enabled him to navigate many different language modalities and equipped Carlton to find common ground and communicate effectively with many Deaf people. He attended both a school for the Deaf and public school and notably, at one point during his public school education he was actually forbidden to use sign language!

Never one to remain idle, Carlton has enjoyed a rich life of diverse experiences. His interest in mime led him into clowning where he created Freddie the Tramp, and performed as a member of the Holy Fools troupe. Following his retirement, he was a food service technician for the Rosamond Gifford Zoo, receiving awards for his many years of dedication to the dietary needs of the animals.

He has also received recognition as Deaf Person of the Year through AURORA and was awarded for his leadership through the Deaf Advocacy Council of CNY. He is an honorary lifetime member of CNY Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf and received a Human Rights Award in 2008 from the Onondaga County/Syracuse Commission on Human Rights for his outstanding work on behalf of the Deaf community.
Carlton freely and generously shares his wisdom and knowledge with others. If there is one regret he has, it is that the Deaf community has lost a sense of connection and cohesion and he would like to see that come back around. He challenges us, and especially the younger generation of Deaf Americans, to “carry the torch.” They can do this by valuing their culture and embracing the responsibilities they have to help and support one another as proud Deaf citizens who can make a difference just as he has.

Thank you, Carlton, for your wonderful example of leadership and concern for the well-being of others, hearing and Deaf, alike.

A Life to Remember

“Larger than life, one of a kind, a force of nature... irreplaceable.” Those are just a few of the words that poured in from consumers and colleagues alike who heard of the sudden passing of our beloved co-worker and friend, Ross DeForrest. He was and will always be known for his fierce dedication to the field of Orientation and Mobility and the role he played in the lives of those he served. He was a champion, cheerleader, and confidante, and a tenacious teacher and advocate. With dedication and a unique and irresistible flair, Ross met each and every person where they were at... and brought them to a better place. One colleague described his skill as being a master at “facilitating the inner strength of others” to overcome the challenge of vision loss.

Those of us who knew Ross, knew that he was a multi-talented and fascinating man, a consummate storyteller who lived an adventurous and interesting life. He was an avid gardener, fisherman and photographer; skilled in everything from woodworking to writing. He approached life with enthusiasm, ingenuity and curiosity, and was always eager to share his discoveries and creations with others. He was a generous and humble man.

Every one of us has a “Ross story” by which we can share his memory: his “Kramer-like” entrances, his nearly daily battle with errant copy machines, and the Friday afternoon, full-volume office hours complete with oldies music! There is no doubt that he leaves a hole that can never be filled. Now we must carry on in his spirit and keep him alive in our hearts. Rest in peace, Ross DeForrest; you will forever be a part of our AURORA family.
Goodbye, Good Friend!

Sharing in the sorrow of her family and the community at large, we at AURORA mourn the unexpected loss of our co-worker and friend, Donna Reese. Donna embodied the heart of everything we do and stand for at AURORA: championing the dignity of all people and paving the way for the best possible path toward independence, autonomy and fair access for all.

Donna was a gifted, deeply passionate and principled advocate who shared her life experience and wisdom to help others. She served as an Outreach Specialist at AURORA, inspired to inform as many people as possible about AURORA’s services and educate others on how to cope and manage a vision/hearing loss. Donna also facilitated the Onondaga County Support Group for People with Vision Loss and provided leadership for many committees over the years including the Airport Accessibility Committee and AURORA’s Program Advisory Committee.

Donna’s presence will be missed by so many but we will do our best to carry on her legacy of selfless service to raise awareness and raise the bar to make this world a better place for all.

Thank you to the following members and donors who are committed to the continuation of AURORA’s vital services for those with vision and/or hearing loss. Names listed are those who have contributed from January 1, 2019 to December 31, 2019. We apologize for any name that may have been omitted from our list. Thank you!!

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Spotlight On: The United Way

AURORA of CNY is a proud participating partner with the United Ways of Central New York, Greater Oswego and Cayuga County. Every year we serve close to 1,500 people and most of them receive our services through programs that are funded by the United Way. Here are just a few examples:

- In Cayuga County, a family in financial need with a child who is Deaf received help from our Deaf Services department to get back on their feet. They were connected with sources for food, and were assisted with finding transportation resources so the child could participate in school activities.

- A gentleman from Onondaga County, struggling with mental health concerns and a vision loss due to diabetes, received support through our care management service and managed to stay healthy, connected with family, and out of the hospital during the holiday season.

- An elderly woman from Oswego County thought she had to decide between getting a new roof or purchasing new hearing aids, until she received service from our Director of Outreach and Education. He cleaned the aids and found that they were in perfect working order and showed her how to use them properly.

Thanks to the funding we receive through United Way we are able to meet the wide range of needs that people with vision or hearing loss experience in our community. Your generous support goes a long way in building the strength of our community, one person at a time.

211– At Your Service

If you need help finding resources for such things as food, shelter, employment, or health care: DIAL 2-1-1.

In July 2000 the Federal Communications Commission assigned the three-digit dialing code 2-1-1 for the exclusive purpose of providing widespread access to community information and referral services. 211 CNY brings together organizations in the community to better serve the residents of five counties: Onondaga, Oswego, Jefferson, Lewis, and St. Lawrence. Call 211 from your landline or cell phone for free help locating important resources. However, if you have trouble connecting you can dial an alternate toll-free number: 1-844-445-1922

AURORA of CNY is a proud participating partner with the United Ways of Central New York, Greater Oswego and Cayuga County.
Join Our Mission—Without the generous support of our donors, we would not have been able to serve this community for over 100 years. Donors like you provide much needed funds for programs such as our support groups, social work services, and skills training.

We appreciate donations in any amount and thank you for your assistance.

Please complete & mail this form to:

AURORA of CNY, 518 James St., Suite 100, Syracuse, NY 13203-2282

AURORA of Central New York 2020 Donation Form

Name ________________________________
Address ________________________________________________________________
City __________________ State __________ Zip ____________
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I would like to make a contribution to AURORA of Central New York at the following level:

☐ $25 ☐ $50 ☐ $100 ☐ $250 ☐ $500* ☐ Other $ __________

☐ Please send me information about AURORA’s Planned Giving Program

I am paying by:
☐ Check (please make checks payable to AURORA of CNY, Inc.)
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My account # ___________________________ Expiration Date __________

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I am aware and allow AURORA of Central New York to charge my card for the above purposes.
Signature: __________________________ Date: ______________

*Gifts may be acknowledged in our newsletter; if you wish to remain anonymous please check here ☐

In return for your gift you receive no material goods or tangible services for supporting AURORA of Central New York. Your donation to AURORA is tax deductible.
Thank You to the Syracuse Corvette Club

AURORA was one of 21 charities chosen to receive a $1,000 award through the generous giving of the Syracuse Corvette Club. An event was held to bring all of the agencies together to share a bit about their mission with club members. The funds are generated through the annual Vettes on the Beach Charity Car Show which is held at Sylvan Beach each year. This year’s event will take place on July 26th, so mark your calendars.