

STOUFFVILLE PEOPLE: Karen Murphy's link to Markham Fair goes way back

Fair president took part in baby contest

BY KEELY GRASSER
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Karen Murphy's love of the Markham Fair started early.

She wasn't even a year old during her first visit, when she was entered in the baby contest.

Flash forward three decades and the Stouffville woman is now overseeing the classic fall event she's been involved with through her childhood, teens and adult life.

Ms Murphy is the president of the 2009 Markham Fair.

"It's something I never imaged I would be doing," she said.

But her lifelong involvement with the fair — and even her lineage — seemed to guide her toward it.

She started as a child, when she entered the fair's contests. Ms Murphy was the runner-up for fair ambassador, the young adult who helps promote the fair during the year, then a junior director, a senior director and finally, a member of the fair's executive.

Her family has produced two fair presidents, including Edward D. Kirk, related to Ms Murphy through her paternal grandmother, who held the position in 1909.

The Markham Fair's history stretches far beyond that century.

It's been a fall tradition here since 1844.

Though things have changed since that time, the event, considered Canada's largest four-day fair, still draws upwards of 60,000 visitors each year.

Running it means lots of work for Ms Murphy, fair staff and the many volunteers who help put it on.

"We start in January and it takes the year to plan it," she explained.

Preparations have kicked into high gear this week, since the fair's just a week away. Ms Murphy had been touching up paint at the fair-ground before this interview. She's on holidays from her personal support worker job at Parkview Home for the Aged during the lead-up to the fair.

"It's been a busy year," she said.

But Ms Murphy reports that everyone has been very supportive of her, including the fair executive and past presidents.

Michelle Irwin, the fair's manager, says Ms Murphy brings a lot of fair history with her, as well, because she's been involved for so long.

"She's just such a warm, won-



STAFF PHOTO/SJOERD WITTEVEEN

Karen Murphy is this year's president of the Markham Fair. Karen grew up on the farm and here helps feed a little calf on Little Rouge Farm in Whitchurch-Stouffville. This year's fair runs Oct. 1 to 4 at the Markham Fairgrounds on McCowan Road.

derful person and caring of anyone involved in the fair," she said.

The fair is a family affair at the Murphy household: husband Tyler (they were entrants in the same baby contest) is also a volunteer and the couple's 7-year-old daughter, Sarah, also helps out, Ms Murphy reports. The family lives beside the farm, on Kennedy Road between Stouffville Road and Bethesda Sideroad, where Ms Murphy grew up. They help her brother and his wife, who now run the farm, with chores from time to time.

The fair, hosted by the Markham and East York agricultural societies, started as a showcase of the area's agriculture.

That continues today, even as

the area becomes more and more urban.

"With agriculture, we're having a lot of challenges with the growth," Ms Murphy said, but noted it also presents an opportunity to educate residents about where their food comes from and to show how important agriculture is to the community.

So this year, the fair has expanded its focus on agriculture education, she said.

For example, local 4-H members will hold live demonstrations at the fair.

Ms Murphy said she really wants to encourage new families to the area to come to the fair and see what it is all about.

Part of what the fair's about will change over time.

"I think you'll see a lot of changes with the fair in the next five or 10 years," Ms Murphy explained, adding things in society are changing drastically, including technology, entertainment and agriculture.

The fair already embraces both the traditional and the new. Modern attractions — like this year's tribute shows to Miley Cyrus, the Jonas Brothers and Hilary Duff, the Dixie Chicks, Faith Hill and Tim McGraw — run alongside classics like horse shows, Old Macdonald's Farm and farm and handicraft displays.

The entertainment, Ms Murphy said, is one of her favourite parts of the fair.

Looking back, her early favourite memories involved coming to the fair and checking whether she had won any ribbons for the items she exhibited, she said.

She also looks fondly back on the demolition derby, the midway and just the sound of the fair, she said.

She says you can smell the fair, the candy apples and the cotton candy and hear the excitement.

Ms Murphy won't step away from all this when she finishes her term as president after the fair, she said.

She'll still be involved next year.

"I think," she said, "I will always have a part of the Markham Fair with me."

"It definitely makes me feel more informed about the community in which I reside."

"I enjoy receiving and reading each issue of the Stouffville Sun-Tribune. It definitely makes me feel more informed about the community in which I reside."

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