

Volunteers needed for 2024 Orangeville Blues and Jazz Festival

By Constance Scrafield

Norm Trudeau is ready and welcoming to new and returning volunteers for the upcoming 20th Annual Orangeville Blues and Jazz Festival, set for the weekend of May 31 to June 2.

‘A person could come up to me early on the Friday morning of the festival and ask if they could help and I would find them a place,’ he said.

As the Festival's volunteer coordinator, Trudeau told the Citizen in a recent interview, ‘I've been a volunteer for 18 years. This is my second year as coordinator of the festival. We did really well last year. Our head count was more than 40,000 coming in? it was the best festival ever.’

The headcount is not the only measure of success, he explained. It is also the feedback from patrons, team leaders and the bands that matter, taking the lessons learned.

A registered not-for-profit, the Orangeville Blues and Jazz Festival does have a financial process. There are three primary avenues of gathering funds: sponsorship, donations and grants but the reckoning is these arts grants will be less this year. There is less funding for arts programs generally, citing not enough government money. This may be a sign of the times, he speculates, perhaps due to high government debt.

As with all such events, this festival took a two-year hiatus through the COVID-19 pandemic.

‘The good thing about music is,’ Trudeau commented, ‘it can be spread through social media.’

He was happy to report that their regulars are coming back already. The festival has a database for constant contact and Trudeau uses that platform to get the word out. Already a meeting has been held of most of the team leaders. This year, for the core of volunteers, they are hoping for 200 to 250, up from under 200 last year.

Volunteers have so many ways to contribute to such a large event, with security, sound for the bands, vendors, set up and tear down of all the platforms and more.

‘Sixty percent of our volunteers are returning,’ he said. ‘This year, we're reaching out to the two [schools] in town, Georgian College, Robert F. Hall [Catholic Secondary School] and Mayfair [Secondary School] for students to do their volunteer hours.’

He encourages families to ‘come with the kids!’

In reaction to some remarks that the large number of attendees last year resulted in the pressure of crowds, considering that Broadway is the main alley in the centre of Orangeville, Trudeau did say that last year was really different. They have taken steps to alleviate the crowding, making some changes to open the Hub corner at Second Street and Broadway. That is the ceremonial apex of the festival and the main stage was set up there, so, they are moving the stage closer to Wellington Street this year.

‘I do ask volunteers to commit to some set hours,’ Trudeau said. ‘Right now, the drive has started. We accept all volunteers right up to and including on the day. But our schedules are family friendly and with chances to see the festival.’

Two more meetings for volunteers are scheduled. One is on April 17 at 7 p.m. at the Orangeville Seniors Centre at 25 Bythia Street and the second is on May 19, to sort out schedules, meet the leaders and go over the Festival's policies.

Naturally, the 2022 Festival was greeted with relief felt everywhere on the part of people happy to have the freedom to be out and enjoy live music again. Thus, the crowds filled the town in 2023, ready to participate in the jubilation the Blues and Jazz Festival creates. Yet such crowds can see problems or disruptions and Trudeau's assurance was that there is always police in attendance.

?We have a licensed area,? he said. ?And part of our budget is for the OPP. They'll be cruising throughout the weekend. The bands are paid and they are coming from all over. Josh [Leitch, President of the Festival] and Peter [Ross, Marketing] handle a budget of \$275,000 for operations and artists.?

The Town of Orangeville and the BIA are helpful, telling us that the Town is on board with the Festival. The festival and the Town have partnered, as has the BIA. Both are also sponsors.

It is all happening everywhere. Restaurants are hosting bands; some of them come and are artist vendors. Ray's Bakery from Alton is making a first stand here, where restaurants register and become vendors for the program. Local businesses are invited to come on board.

This year will see more use of the main stage in the Opera House with a Friday evening concert.

Volunteers are not expected to deliver first aid and none are trained but St. John's Ambulance will be on site.

There is one main licensed area serving beer and wine. No spirits are sold except in coolers. Security is handled by paid duty officers, a security group and events staff who man the exits, meaning contingencies are in place.

The Citizen asked what kind of learning curve has been negotiated since the Festival began.

?Year One,? he reminisced, ?was a one-day affair with six bands and 20 people. Over the years, it grew. The Board and staff are constantly learning. Our mission is to provide the best service that welcomes people from ages two to 92 and up, constantly looking for ways to do better.?

Last year. there was very good feedback from the vendors, parking and visitors.

As to what keeps Trudeau involved:

?I love the music,? he said. ?I've lived in Orangeville for 55 years. It's my hometown!?

For details about volunteering for the Blues and Jazz Festival 2024, please contact: norm@orangevillebluesandjazz.ca.