

Mulmur's Pine River Institute wins 2024 Defender Services Award

Written By PAULA BROWN

LOCAL JOURNALISM INITIATIVE REPORTER

Pine River Institute is receiving a boost to continue helping youth facing addiction and mental health struggles after winning the 2024 Defender Services Award.

The local organization announced in a press release on Monday (Nov. 25) that they had won the Outdoor Accessibility and Education Award category of the 2024 Defender Services Award. As the winners of the Outdoor Accessibility and Education Award, Pine River Institute is taking home the grand prize - a 130 Defender vehicle, \$25,000 USD and an additional \$5,000 USD for being in the top five finalists.

"It has been a long process to get to this win, filled with a lot of suspense and excitement. It was absolutely thrilling to be there and hear our name called and to be able run up on stage to accept this wonderful award," said Jill Palmer, executive director of development for Pine River, who was in California for the announcement at Destination Defender on Nov. 23. "This is an amazing win for Pine River, and it will really help propel us forward. A lot of people helped us get to this win."

The Defender Service Awards are an annual initiative that looks to recognize charitable organizations. The awards include five categories that reflect the Defender brand's commitment to bringing a positive impact to the community through acts of service and humanitarian efforts around the world.

This year, the initiative awarded six customized Defender 130 vehicles to six charitable organizations in the U.S., Puerto Rico and Canada. The sponsors of each category also pledged to award \$25,000 USD to the six winners.

In September, Pine River Institute was announced as a finalist in the Outdoor Accessibility and Education Award category, which focuses on supporting people who can benefit from the outdoors. In late October, the local organization provided an update that they were one of two remaining finalists in their category.

The Pine River Institute is a treatment centre, located in Mulmur, that looks to help adolescents struggling with addictive behaviours as well as mental health challenges regain control of their lives through their programming. The Pine River Institute has a four-phase program for youth and their families that starts with a six to eight-week-long Outdoor Leadership Experience in Algonquin.

According to Pine River Institute, there are more than 100 teens and families on their waitlist, which they typically stay on for anywhere from six months to one year.

In order to help operate their program, Pine River Institute utilizes a fleet of eight vehicles. The organization has two vehicles up north at their Outdoor Leadership Experience, one in Orilla at their transition house and five on the main campus in Mulmur.

The newly won 130 Defender vehicle that Pine River will be receiving as the winner of the 2024 Defender Service Award will be going to their existing fleet of vehicles.

The vehicle will be used to transfer food supplies and equipment such as canoes, cross-country skis and mountain bikes for the Outdoor Leadership Experience. The eight-seater will also help with transporting staff and students between the wilderness program, the 200-acre property north of Shelburne, the transitional housing facility in Orilla and the various therapeutic activities they attend across the County.

"We really need vehicles," said Palmer. "This Land Rover Defender is everything we need to get the kids into the wilderness for the

beginning of our program.?

The institution is expecting to receive and begin using the 130 Defender in early 2025.

The total of \$30,000 USD in funding from the award will be going towards the institution's programming on campus as well as its outreach work, which focuses on prevention and education through its Centre for Family Initiatives.

To date, the Centre for Family Initiatives has led more than 80 webinars in the community with more than 700 people attending live. Pine River Institute also works with seven Ontario School Boards regarding addiction and mental health and hopes to expand that number to 10 in 2025.

?We take the Pine River model and what we know about youth addiction and mental health to education and train families, educators and clinicians so that we can prevent kids falling into an addiction or mental health crisis,? said Palmer.

Dufferin County residents played a significant role in Pine River Institute's achievement of becoming a finalist and ultimately winning the 2024 Defender Services Awards. The contest was based on a voting system, which required individuals to cast their ballots in support of Pine River Institute. The voting ballots were accepted until Oct. 17.

?We had incredible support from across Dufferin County and Ontario from our supporters and we know those votes made a difference,? said Palmer. ?Our thanks for our supporters for doing that. It was a really wonderful, warm way to involve people and we really felt the momentum behind us.?

To learn more about Pine River Institute's programs and services, visit www.pineriverinstitute.com.