

Burning up the dance floor sets North American record



By Brock Weir

Despite his age, young A.J. considers himself a proud ?veteran.?

Born with osteogenesis imperfecta, a condition which causes very brittle bones, he endures several broken bones each year, making some activities loved by boys his age out of the question.

Thanks to Easter Seals, however, these activities are now very much possible.

?At other camps, I have not been allowed to do certain activities because the staff would be worried I would break a bone, so I never thought I would stay overnight at a camp,? said A.J., this year's Easter Seals Ambassador. ?Now I am a camp veteran!?

Over 50 potential veterans are now set to join A.J.'s ranks after local community leaders laced up their dancing shoes and hit the dance floor at The Manor at Carrying Place last week, raising nearly \$90,000 to send children like A.J. to summer camp ? a North American fundraising record for the charity's Dancing With The Easter Seals Stars program.

Dancing With The Easter Seals stars brings together community leaders with professional dancers for a night of fun all in the name of helping kids achieve their full potential. Here in Aurora and Newmarket, our leaders were paired up with Patrick Derry, Kelly Stacey, and Anastasia Trutneva, co-owners of Aurora's Artistica Ballroom Dance Studio, and put in hours of sweat ? and maybe a few good tears ? to entertain the packed house and the careful scrutiny of judges, including former mayor Tim Jones.

Taking home the coveted Judge's Choice award was fitness instructor Andrea Peterson, wife of Newmarket-Aurora MP Kyle Peterson, who the Artistica instructors praised for her ?high energy level.?

?She literally laughs hysterically through the entire routine,? they said. ?She is constantly breaking out in random booty-shaking out of nowhere. She may be little, but good things come in small packages.?

Representing Aurora in the competition were former businessperson and avid volunteer Brian North and realtor Lindsay Strom.

?Brian, the seemingly angelic and sweet man, can be seen bribing and buttering up all the judges,? said the Artistica team, referencing the tongue-in-cheek social media videos and photos each contestant put out to raise awareness of the competition. ?Brian is the elder of the group and likes to point that out to us on a regular basis. Brian gets all the bonus points for being super-positive about this whole experience.?

In addition to the bonus points, he also took home the Fred & Ginger Award for his fancy footwork. Lindsay, on the other hand, got the trophy for Best Technique.

?Lindsay got so excited when she heard the song she was dancing her Peabody to she couldn't concentrate enough to practice her rhumba anymore,? said Artistica, who donated approximately 130 lessons, 100 hours of time, the equivalent to \$15,000 worth of instruction, to the cause. ?She jumped into this later than anyone, so she really impressed us with her optimistic energy.?

While Ms. Peterson rose to the top, she was joined in the top three by businesspeople and volunteers Tony De Pede, who took home Best Energy, and Nikki Pett, who was named ?Most Passionate.?

Also recognized were Newmarket graphic designer Rob Clark with Best Entertainment, former Newmarket councillor Chris

Emanuel with Best Creativity, and videographer Jennifer Buchanan, who was named 'Most Sassy'.

But, what was A.J.'s verdict? 'They were pretty good!'

'You guys rock,' he said, announcing their fundraising achievement. 'As an Easter Seals Ambassador, I have the opportunity to help bring awareness to kids with physical disabilities but, at the same time, I also want people to know that we are not so different from anyone else. We want to be able to go to different places, have friends, participate in different activities, and be the best that we can be.'

'[In my first year at camp] I saw my cabin and bed I was pumped up and excited already. I was going to be away from my parents for 10 days! I went rock climbing, swimming, exploring nature, camped out, tried archery and so much more, but my favourite was camping out and exploring. I have learned some new skills like how to set the fire wood, how to put marshmallows in the fire and even how to set up our tents. We sang camp songs and told stories around the camp fire and I learned to do things as much as I could. I learned to be more independent.'

The aspiring software developer added: 'When my parents picked me up I said I wished I could stay for longer. They were so surprised. I mean, I missed my parents but it was so much fun knowing I can do so much without them. My parents were so proud of me and, of course, I had to go back again. Easter Seals and people like you makes it possible for kids like me to succeed. Thank you for your help in believing in us.'

Event emcee ' and 2015 contestant ' Steve Hinder told the crowd since its inception locally last year Dancing with the Easter Seals Stars Aurora-Newmarket has since grown to one of York Region's 'premiere' fundraising event.