

Community leaders, dancers raise nearly \$100,000 for Easter Seals



By Brock Weir

Casey MacKay had plenty of reasons to bust a move.

He had a pact. If local community leaders raised over a certain amount of money with their dance moves, he would get up there on the floor himself and show them how it's really done.

Well, the leaders delivered and Casey was beaming as he strode onto the dance floor to take a twirl ? the fact he was able to get on the dance floor with his walker leaving this year's participants in the 2017 Dancing with the Easter Seals Stars beaming from ear to ear as well.

Local business people busted out of their comfort zones all barrels blazing on Thursday night for Dancing with the Easter Seals Stars Aurora-Newmarket, the third annual fundraiser which pairs local movers and shakers with professional movers and shakers from Aurora's Artistica Ballroom Dance Studios all in the name of raising funds to send kids with physical challenges to summer camp ? and, when you get to the core of it, let kids be kids.

?When people think of Dancing with the Stars, they think of the ABC reality show, celebrities and the glitz and glamour, but everyone has spent their time and effort on kids who need their help the most, said Ben MacDonald. ?You truly are the biggest and brightest stars who ever hit the dance floor.?

Dancing with the Easter Seals Stars is a North America-wide movement held in different communities at different points in the year. Last year, the Aurora-Newmarket DWTS event set a North American record; and they topped themselves this year raising a whopping \$97,000.

This staggering figure will go a long way in helping kids like Ben not only receive the tools they need from Easter Seals to move and be independent, but also form the lasting bonds of friendship with kids who share their unique perspectives on life, perspectives honed by their own unique experiences.

Ben, 17, who hails from Sault Ste. Marie, lives with Duchenne muscular dystrophy, a degenerative neuromuscular condition that causes muscles to weaken. An Easter Seals Ambassador in his own hometown for the past two years, he is representing the Province in the 2017 campaign.

Like most kids living with disabilities, Ben has had few opportunities to form friendships with kids like him and told Easter Seals organizers having the opportunities to do so through Easter Seals camps have been ?extremely valuable? and important.

?I am honoured that Grace Kennedy, my cohort, and I have the opportunity to be a part of this wonderful event and speak on behalf of Easter Seals Ontario,? Ben told the sold out crowd at The Venetian in Vaughan. ?First and foremost, I would like to extend our gratitude towards everyone in attendance for showing support for the wonderful organization that is Easter Seals. By coming here, you are showing support and it is just amazing. We would also like to thank all the organizers, sponsors, dance teachers and, of course, the dancers ? some of whom are stepping out of their comfort zones tonight ? for showing support. By being here, you are helping provide physically disabled youth from across Ontario with the supports and necessary equipment that is required [for life]. ?I have Duchenne muscular dystrophy, which means my body is unable to produce a protein which is important for repairing

muscles. As I get older, my muscles weaken and weaken. Easter Seals has been a great help for me. A few years ago, when I first heard of them, I was astonished by the sheer magnitude of [their support across Ontario]. Easter Seals does a phenomenal job helping kids be kids.?

Like Grace, Ben said he too has had the camp experience and ?had the time of his life? doing ?stuff I never even mentioned doing before? like climbing a rock wall. But, most importantly, he got to meet ?a lot of different kids and awesome people with disabilities? whereas in so many other circumstances he is the only one.

?I want to be a voice for those of us who might not have one,? he concluded. ?That's why everyone's support here tonight is so important.?

Helping kids and teens like Ben find their voice, of course, were the stars of the evening, put through their paces by and partnered with Anastasia Trutneva, Kelly Stacey and Patrick Derry of Artistica. They were fraktals founder Ingrid Kulbach, former professional soccer player and current president of the Aurora Youth Soccer Club Jimmy Brennan, Snapd Aurora's Melanie Bell, tech leader Sarid Layton, financial advisor Kevin Murdoch, realtor Susie Strom, Brian Johns of Vince's Market, and entrepreneur Stewart McLaren.

Wowing the crowd with Patrick dancing the ?Tango? to Despacito and the Peabody to ?Careless Whisper?, Melanie Bell was crowned the overall winner, taking home our local interpretation of the coveted Mirror Ball trophy.

?The experience has been really great,? Ms. Bell told judges. ?At the end of the day, we're doing it for the kids.?

Added Mr. Brennan: ?This is one of the hardest things I have ever done. I have been sweating for two weeks and I'm more nervous tonight than in any of my games.?