Student Hoedown marks fifth year of building an inclusive community



By Brock Weir

The summer holiday
is, for some students, a time of rest and relaxation, and maybe making some extra money while school is out.

For others, it was
all that and more after finding out in June they had scored a coveted ticket to the fifth annual Student Hoedown, which marks its fifth anniversary in Aurora this Friday, September 13.

The Student Hoedown
was founded in 2014 by York Region District School Board Special Needs teachers Derek Bunn and Dave Pilkey as a way to get their students ? and Special Needs students from across the Region in both school boards ? a chance to have fun and give back to their communities.

Featuring live music
from the Top 10 finalists in the 2010 Magna Hoedown, a chance to dance, have great food, and meet heroes brought to life by Marquee Theatrical Productions, all in a setting tailored to meet the needs of individuals who might have sensory challenges, it was a huge hit from the outset and has only grown over the last four years.

?It is probably one
of the few concerts that our kids with disabilities can go where it is inclusive, where it is modified for them to enjoy with the sound and lights at a certain level, and everyone is there to make it work,? says Mr. Bunn, a teacher at Sutton District High School. ?The people are appreciative of having the students there and the students are appreciative because it is an adult-style concert without their parents, and it is another step towards kids

learning about independence and learning about community and belonging.

?Even though this is in September and we're in the third week of school, for kids to say in September this is the best school trip of the year, I am very happy about that ? well, I'm also kind of sad that the rest of the school trips aren't going to be that great! ? but it makes me feel good and it sure makes Neighbourhood Network, Magna and the hundreds of volunteers that help out those days feel good as well.?

Looking ahead to Friday's event, which will take place under the big top of the Hoedown Tent, Mr. Bunn says he sees the fifth anniversary as something of a ?rebirth.? When they first started out, he and Mr. Pilkey weren't quite sure they would be able to pull off their vision.

?There were a lot of aches and pains and planning for Year One, then when you saw it happening, you thought, ?We just stumbled upon something really amazing and wonderful for our students, community and charities.' In Year One, we were just in awe. It was another added bonus to the Hoedown weekend and each year it became easier in the planning and making sure everything was done right.

?Now that we're at Year Five, oh, my goodness, it's like we're starting Kindergarten and that's wonderful. Every student and every adult coming into the tent is bringing a charitable donation to all those charities Magna supports [through Hoedown] and that's a big message for our students and part of the spirit ? we're giving back to the community and we're giving back to all those charities that help out people in the community. For kids who maybe feel they can't contribute to their community in a positive way, that gives them the opportunity.?

With each passing year of the Student Hoedown, Mr. Bunn says he's staggered by the sheer level of participation from students, teachers, caregivers, performers and organizers.

?You come here expecting just a concert and the Hoedown finalists, but there is so much going on in the tent, and one year we even had a horse and rider come into the tent,? he says. ?Outside the tent, there's Selena Stronach and her cows, and last year there was an equal number of people outside getting their pictures taken with all the cows and all the stuff Selena was able to provide as inside the tent. Then, when you're inside the tent, the people are dressed up from Marquee and Superman is there and the students can't believe they met Superman!

?This event brings energy, it brings people together, people are meeting people from other schools, sharing, and all under the blanket of a fundraising event that is totally accessible. The accessible washroom trailer (built with contributions from York Region municipalities like Aurora) is going to be there, EMS is going to be there; there is no country

music fundraiser in York Region that is 100 per cent inclusive, but the Magna Hoedown is.?