

Energy and change in the air for Saturday's Mardi Gras



By Brock Weir

After 14 years benefiting Southlake Regional Health Centre, Carolyn Hamill is eager to see the energy that comes with change.

Change is in the air for Ms. Hamill, who co-founded the annual Mardi Gras for Southlake fundraiser, which benefits the Pediatric Oncology unit at Southlake Regional Health Centre. After a long run at The Mansion, this Saturday's Mardi Gras will be an evening of firsts.

Not only will it be the first Mardi Gras held in their new venue at Aw, Shucks at the southwest corner of Yonge and Wellington, but it is also hoped to be the first in an entirely new direction for the fundraiser which will ultimately connect other restaurants throughout the entire community served by Southlake for a series of events all on the same evening, all for the same cause.

"We're having a lot more fun this year because, for us, this is a bit of a challenge," said Ms. Hamill as preparations were well underway at the restaurant. "We come here for our meetings and we've sat around thinking, 'now what can we do?'"

They anticipated a problem with Ben, one of their regular performers, who entertains crowds with his stilt walking and juggling, but he was all too happy to downsize his routine for a more ceiling-friendly unicycle and, with bands and revellers spread out over two floors, the new dynamic is exciting.

"We're going to bring the old in with the new, but we have to make it a little bit different, with a goal of making it something that can be duplicated across many different venues," said Ms. Hamill. "This is our test run and the people at Aw, Shucks! have been very generous donating food, along with our own food donors, and knowing we're pretty much covered and they're backing everything for us means it is a real fundraiser now because everything that comes through the door goes straight to the cause.

"I want to see the new energy. In the old venue, where we would set up the [Bourbon Street] façade, I would stand there and always take a moment to stop and look around because there is so much that went into doing it. You could feel the energy, feel the excitement, and feel the ambiance that was created when everything came together and I think we're going to experience that even more at this venue! It is going to be a fantastic environment."

Ms. Hamill was on hand at Aw, Shucks while media representatives put their "expertise" to the test in choosing the final dish to be presented as part of Saturday's Mardi Gras menu. (See Page 4). The winning dish was a duck etouffee created by Aw, Shucks! chef Grant Robertson.

"I tried to keep things as original as possible and as close to what they make down there," said Mr. Robertson, who also prepared a

seafood gumbo and fried catfish with jambalaya for our discerning palates. ?I just want to show what the Regional Dishes of Louisiana and Southern New Orleans are all about and what is local down there. There are actually a lot of hunters and gatherers with people hunting for ducks, alligators and snakes, but I have tried to keep it as much towards the line of what people respect and understand for food up here, compared to down there ? but I would love to throw everything out there!?

Rest assured, alligators and snakes did not make the final cut at this year's Mardi Gras venue, but a variety of stick-to-your-ribs dishes, drinks, as well as the traditional carnival king cake will be in store for this weekend's party.

For more information on Mardi Gras for Southlake 2014, including ticket information visit mardigrasforsouthlake.com.