

## Hoedown for Special Needs kids to be a first this year



Community groups gathered at Adena on Wednesday morning for the annual Hoedown kick-off. Auroran photo by Brock Weir

**By Brock Weir**

It is a familiar sight to Aurora residents each September when the big white tent arrives on Wellington Street East, signalling the imminent arrival of Magna's annual Wild, Wild West Hoedown.

The rise of the tent often precedes the main event by a week or two, and York Region teachers are determined to make the most of it this year.

This September 18, the Friday afternoon before the main festivities get underway, the tent will host the very first Hoedown dedicated to special needs students. The special event is the brainchild of, in part, Derek Bunn, a Special Education Teacher at Sutton District High School. Mr. Bunn approached Aurora's Neighbourhood Network with an innovative idea to make best use of the tent, building on their own experiences at the Markham Fair.

'The Fair has a great event for all students with special needs and I thought it's too bad we couldn't combine Hoedown with the same sort of idea for special needs students in York Region,' says Mr. Bunn. 'I pitched the idea to them as a way to expand the traditional Hoedown to include a daytime event that special needs students from the York Region District School Board and the York Catholic District School Board can attend and they were excited about it. They thought it was a great idea and agreed that the tent is up there for a period of time because they have to get so much set up, they just want to make use of it and promote the community as well.'

Invited to the party are all special needs students across the boards, along with their friends from the Best Buddies program and peer groups. There will be a barbecue and entertainment provided by some of the talent lineup on tap for the main Hoedown itself.

'Neighbourhood Network has provided everything for us - the tent, the entertainment and they have been generous in sitting down with us and trying to make it fit us,' says Mr. Bunn. 'They have basically given us the run of everything and said, 'How can we make this a great event for you guys?' We're very appreciative of them!'

As the school year wrapped up last month, students were given their first inkling of the festivities to come once the new year begins in September. Word has now gone out to all the kids through both school boards, and 500 people are committed to coming. And the numbers are still rolling in. There is excitement in the air, he says, and this excitement began to gain momentum as they spread the message at special needs track and field events across York Region.

Cowboy hats and wagon wheels on site to help with the promo only served to build anticipation.

Those planning on attending will be encouraged to make a voluntary donation of up to \$10 which they can put towards any one ? or more than one! ? of the 15 charities, clubs and non-profits partnered with Hoedown this year to share the proceeds.

?It is a great opportunity for our students and even our community to see that students with special needs can contribute to charities in our communities, which I think is a nice twist on an idea,? says Mr. Bunn. Mr. Bunn began his work with special needs students first as an educational assistant in the Catholic stream before working for 18 years with Community Living. Now working in Sutton, he says the most rewarding part of the job is developing skillsets with each student.

?The greatest thing is when you see kids that learn to communicate and advocate for themselves and learn functional life skills, and they can be successful in the community,? he says. ?At the same time, you are educating the community that these kids and future adults have a place in our community.?

One possible speedbump on the road ahead, however, remains the labour dispute now being waged between teachers' unions and the Province. Although this is a cloud hanging over the Students' Hoedown, Mr. Bunn is hopeful everything will go as planned ? and that is the objective teachers are working towards.

?The biggest thing [I want people to come away with] is meeting people and students from other programs and developing friendships and knowing there is a larger community of special needs in York Region. This is a great opportunity to network and have fun with other people in the community. That is so important.?

Early Bird tickets for Hoedown are now on sale. For more information, visit [www.hoedown.ca](http://www.hoedown.ca).