

Community Classroom students dance their way to 8,000 miracles



By Brock Weir

Students in York Region's Community Classrooms are often on the receiving end of support but they proved Friday, one dance move at a time, they can make a huge difference well beyond the community.

Over 100 students from York Region's Community Classrooms ? classrooms tailored to students on the autism spectrum, students living with mild intellectual disabilities, as well as developmentally delayed students, descended on Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School to get their groove on for a Dance-A-Thon benefiting Toronto's SickKids Hospital.

Armed with a link to their website, as well as pledge forms, the students set out to hit a \$2,000 goal ? but they kicked things up to eleven, with the 20 participating schools raising an impressive \$8,400 and counting!

Organized by four Williams teachers, with a marketing assist from the school's Media Arts students, the first seeds of the idea were sown on a field trip last spring to the SNAP (Special Needs Athletic Program) Tournament.

?Usually at the half time, they play music and the kids start dancing, which they just loved to do,? said teacher Paul Grassi. ?They love to show off their moves and are just so happy once the music is on. We thought the twist could be that it would be a community exercise where the students could raise funds for SickKids. The kids are so used to receiving things from other people, it would be nice to put themselves out there to raise money and see what that would look like.?

Urged on by fellow York Region District School Board teacher Dave Pilkey, one of the lead organizers on the now-annual Student Hoedown which tailors the yearly Magna Hoedown experience to special needs students from across the area, the Williams teachers pitched the idea to students.

Having all, in some way or another, been impacted by the work the Hospital for Sick Children carries out day in and day out, it was an easy sell.

?A lot of people really relate to it and I can tell you our website has been going crazy!? said Mr. Paul Grassi as the numbers continued to roll in leading up to the Friday event when they were sitting at just under \$2,000. ?My thought at the beginning was, ?What if we raise eleven bucks? but it has really turned into a nice fundraiser. Over the last few days we have been seeing all these little donations come in and the kids are so excited to watch [the online fundraising] thermometer go up. The Children's Miracle Network has been amazing in helping us set up our website.

?We told parents, we told the kids, we told the administrators this was not a door-to-door soliciting event at all. The kids have pledge forms, but we don't want them going to businesses or going down the street knocking on doors ? but we weren't expecting such a big hit on our website. But, that's what happened ? a lot of people have donated and, on top of that, the kids have been getting cash and cheque donations.?

In addition to that, one of the students in a school had been making and selling Christmas decorations and selling them in the school at lunchtimes to benefit the hospital, while other schools have donated proceeds from their school stores.

Helping the students make the event memorable were a number of community businesses ranging the Dollar Store at Henderson and

Yonge, to Costco's donation of over 320 bottles of water, to PizzaPizza which donated 50 party-size pizzas, and to Williams graduate Megan Flynn of Simply Yummy bakery who donated 500 chocolate chip cookies to keep the students well-fuelled.
?All the main food groups!? Mr. Grassi joked.

It was enough to do the trick, however, as over 120 students filled the Williams cafeteria, showing off their moves to students from other high schools, enjoying tracks as varied from artists as varied as Katy Perry and Taylor Swift to The Spice Girls, all spun by the house DJ ? Williams teacher Mark Watkin.

These dance parties, facilitated by the Children's Miracle Network, have sparked a fundraising frenzy across the country with Dr. G.W. Williams and the students in the York Region School Board, now adding their spark to the growing flame.

The \$8,011 will go directly to the hospital.