

Dancing with the Easter Seals Stars marks 10th anniversary with million-dollar goal



Daniella Altieri still recalls the feeling that she could do anything she wanted.

With the help of dedicated counsellors, she felt a whole new world open up to her while attending Easter Seals camps as a youth. She made new friends, enjoyed the great outdoors, and even discovered the joys of sledge hockey, which she played for more than five years, and now the former Easter Seals Ambassador and Early Childhood Educator is set to help pay it forward for children who were just like her as she prepares to hit the dance floor for Dancing with The Stars Aurora Newmarket.

The popular annual event, which is marking its tenth anniversary this year, will take place Thursday, October 9, at the Royal Venetian Mansion.

Joining Altieri in bringing star wattage to this year's party are Kitchen Table CEOs founder Tracy Smith; restaurateur Martin McQueen; Phil Rose, Manager of Cultural Services for the Town of Aurora; lawyer Jay Wilmot; entrepreneur Shabi Monzavi; Aurora Black Community Association founder and president Phiona Durrant; and business owner Samantha Buckley.

Since Dancing with the Stars Aurora Newmarket was first established by Easter Seals, with expert dance instruction from the owners of Aurora's Artistica Ballroom Dance Studios, the event has raised just shy of \$1 million for the organization, which aims to send kids like Daniella to camp and provide mobility supports to youth in need.

Andrea Prentice-Peterson of Easter Seals tells The Auroran they need to raise just over \$150,000 this year to hit that impressive \$1 million mark and they know they can get there thanks to the dancers and community members who step up to purchase tickets and support the stars along the way.

‘This event has become a staple in the community and I think this is one of the most anticipated events that happens every year because everybody is always looking out to see who will be dancing,’ says Prentice-Peterson. ‘Every year, it’s a different cast of people, it’s a different theme, it’s a different set of songs, and people are always packing in to watch it. The fact that we’re trying to make it a little bit bigger and a little bit better this year just makes it that much more enticing!’

This year's theme is A Night of the Silver Screen, and contestants are hard at work with Artistica instructors Anastasia, Kelly, Patrick and Sarah to bring some iconic moves to iconic movie music.

A long-time spokesperson for Easter Seals, Altieri has attended many of the Dancing with the Stars events, but it was only after last year's extravaganza when she approached the Artistica team to hit the dance floor herself.

"Ever since then I've been practicing for this, I'm over the moon. I'm so excited," she says. "You're helping kids be kids. You're helping kids know that just because they have a disability they can still do anything they want to. I'm trying to raise awareness that people with disabilities can do anything they want to do if they just think about it. You're helping kids be kids, you're helping a wonderful organization do that and I think that's just so beautiful."

It's a cause that resonates strongly with the assembled cast of celebs as well.

"Easter Seals is definitely an amazing cause and once I knew the goal of the event was raising funds for kids with physical disabilities in Ontario, it is an amazing reason to push yourself," says Smith, before chuckling. "I need to practice, practice, practice" period. I'm just trying not to embarrass myself out there, make my instructor proud, my friends and family watching it, and just giving it my all."

Also looking to give it her all, and not worry too much about the dance moves themselves, is Durrant.

First approached to participate in the event in 2022, she signed up this year "sure in the knowledge that, with the right song she has some good moves, but she wasn't quite anticipating being asked to bust out a cartwheel on October 9. She hasn't quite mastered it yet, but the event itself might be a different story as she hits the gymnastics studio to get it done.

"The whole point of this is fun," says Durrant. "I was practicing at home one day and just started bawling because it got so emotional, knowing that here I am worrying about being perfect and getting it right, when I remember going to the (Easter Seals) camp, one of the campers' testimonies. [She said] the first time she stood up was when she was in the pool. Here I am, I have two feet, I can run, jump, and even have the ability to try, and some of them would never have that opportunity to stand up and dance on their own two feet, but here I am being picky about whether I'm doing it right. Just go, have fun, raise your funds, and show up for the community."

"I was more comfortable to not so much worry about how many different moves I need to remember, but just remembering the impact this is going to make."

The collective impact is what "sealed the deal" for Rose after he too visited an Easter Seals camp.

"They were all just excited to have a space where they can become independent, they can socialize, they can be themselves where they can't be 51 weeks out of the year," he says. "For me, it was just an easy way to say yes to a really important organization. This is just about providing independence and autonomy for children with disabilities by giving them the programming and also the tools they need to live a full life."

"This is one of those fundraisers where you know that the money you're putting into this is going to go directly to support and improve the lives of children with disabilities. Whatever the cost [to attend] is, it's well worth it" and, on top of that, you get a night of good food and community, a chance to meet some people, and hopefully have a few laughs along the way!?"

For more information about this year's Dancing with the Easter Seals Stars Aurora-Newmarket, including tickets and how to support individuals Stars on their fundraising journey, visit eastersealsdancing.org/newmarket.

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