

Fashion Through the Ages raises tens of thousands for men's health



The global pandemic might have prevented Omars Shoes from celebrating its first half-century in Aurora back in 2020, but they more than made up for it on May 20 when they celebrated their 55th anniversary with Fashion Through the Ages.

The fashion show, which featured several community leaders – including Aurora Mayor Tom Mrakas and King Mayor Steve Pellegrini – as models was intended not only to celebrate the store's milestone, but to also raise money for men's health programs at Southlake Health.

The fashion show concept was first conceived by the Khamissa family, which has owned and operated Omar's over three generations, as a way to benefit the local hospital, but co-owner Raz's ongoing battle with prostate cancer made the event have an even more personal resonance.

Recovering from surgery earlier this month, and a minor "hiccup" that briefly sent him back to the hospital just a few days before the event, it was unclear until the eleventh hour whether Raz would be able to attend, but when he walked through the door just before models took to the catwalk, he was greeted with a loud and enthusiastic ovation.

"It was very overwhelming," he told The Auroran following the event. "My original plan, I was hoping I'd be able to make it for part of the night, come in for the fashion show, and then disappear after, but there was no chance of my leaving after I got there. A lot of well-wishers were coming up, and it was just a very heartwarming and emotional night.

"The love in that room just felt incredible."

Raz's wife, store co-owner Mae Khamissa, said her husband's appearance at The Royal Venetian Mansion that evening took her somewhat by surprise as things were still uncertain when she set out for the venue earlier in the day.

"I was going around from table to table and it just so happened I was walking past when I saw Raz in his blazer, and that just blew me away," she shared.

Looking back on the success of the evening, which included a live auction on the floor that raised an additional \$20,000 for the cause, Mae says they were left "totally blown away" by how it all came together.

"Southlake is our hospital, meaning everyone's hospital," she says. "I had my three kids there, (father-in-law and store founder) Omar was diagnosed there and spent a lot of time there on the cancer floor as a patient, and now with Raz, it really meant a lot – and I think it was key that everybody got a chance to be part of it.

?We picked a perfect bunch (of models) because we had different age groups that evening, including a couple of tables of young'uns in their 30s ? all the kids and kids' friends that just grew up in our home, so it was nice. We're a family store and we wanted to show that part.?

At the end of the day, however, despite their own personal journey, it was Southlake they really wanted to be the focus of the evening ? a mission that was certainly accomplished.

?We generally just assume that hospitals get funding totally from the government and what we don't realize is each department is basically fighting to get funding for new machines and new equipment,? says Mae. ?We know various friends who are actually being diagnosed right now that have to go to Toronto to get tested on these machines, so it is key that whatever role we play that we look to support events like these.

?We just want to thank everybody [who participated]. We are so grateful and we thank them for coming to celebrate Omar's 55 years with us, but we're just grateful that they were there at the same time to support an incredible and meaningful cause to us, especially with what Raz is going through.?

By Brock Weir