

Hoedown to get 'wilder' for York Region's special students

By Brock Weir

'Bigger and wilder' ? that's what York Region teacher Derek Bunn is promising as he and Magna prepare to welcome nearly 1,000 of York Region's special needs students to Aurora this Friday for a Hoedown of their own.

York Region's biggest two-day party is set to get underway this Friday night with Great Big Sea's Alan Doyle and the finals in the popular Hoedown Showdown but, for the second year running, the bash will begin a bit earlier with a Hoedown tailor-made for kids facing challenges.

The brainchild of Mr. Bunn and Magna, last year's Special Hoedown was wildly successful, attracting 700 students, and it has only been building momentum.

The event not only allows the students to get a preview of the evening's entertainment and dance the afternoon away with special accommodations made for those students with sensory issues, but it also gives them a chance to give back to the community by donating to the Hoedown community partners of their choice.

'It was such a large collection of special needs students within York Region all giving to charities and I found that amazing,' says Mr. Bunn, looking back on last year. 'Students were able to contribute to 15 different charities and I found that such a wonderful thing and the energy level was incredible.'

'And no one was drunk!' he adds with a laugh. 'The energy was just so positive and I think the organizers of the Hoedown themselves were just as excited to see such a wonderful energy at Hoedown.'

As the big day rapidly approaches for the students, that excitement level is mounting. Last year, the kids and teens were particularly stoked to get up on stage and say a few words to the crowds, take the crown as Best Dressed Cowboy or Cowgirl ? and this year? Well, that's where the 'bigger and wilder' comes in.

'This past spring, I sent out emails to all the schools that are coming with information and at our last track and field meet for the secondary schools I had tables set up there and our students in our special needs classes at Sutton High made the banner just to get people thinking about it, and every teacher I have heard back from is saying they're excited, they're pumped and can't wait,' he says.

'Everything just went so smoothly last year and I think that was the surprise of it all: the people from Neighbourhood Network, the Hoedown organizers, were just so conscientious of our needs, the sounds, the lights, adjusting the volume and not having the strobe lights on kids who have medical conditions. I can't think of anything we would have done differently and I think that is part of the excitement that last year was such a great success the first time running it.

'For some parents, it was giving [their kids] a safe place to have a concert and they knew they were going to be well taken care of and their needs would be met. We are excited, the students are excited, we like participating in our community, and we are happy to give back to the community and I can't think of anything better than that.'

For more on Magna's annual Wild, Wild West Hoedown, which takes place this Friday with headliner Alan Doyle and on Saturday with headliner Paul Brandt, visit www.hoedown.ca.