

Reborn Mardi Gras ball raises over \$10,000 for young Southlake patients



By Brock Weir

Mardi Gras for Southlake is one of the more popular events on the Aurora social calendar and although it has been a mainstay in the community for well over a decade, Saturday's 14th annual event marked the beginning of a new chapter.

Taking place for the first time at the recently opened Aw, Shucks!, the Bourbon Street Ball had an air of familiarity in its new location, benefiting Southlake's Pediatric Oncology unit.

This year's event, however, almost didn't happen. After expanding the Ball to include a series of events, including the Creole Casino and Poker Night, as well as the Bite of the Big Easy, bringing together many Aurora restaurants, the Mardi Gras North foundation decided to sit this year out and begin building a new model.

They wanted to focus on building their sponsorship base before a re-launch in 2015, but a chance approach to Aw, Shucks! conjured up a new opportunity when the restaurant heard this year's event might not happen. Through conversations with owners Larry Smith and Ross Jones, restaurant General Manager Taylor Dinner, 25, entered the picture.

Mr. Dinner, who was treated in the pediatric oncology unit in his early 20s when he was diagnosed with lymphoma, knew all too well the benefits of fundraising for such an organization and, through further talks, secured the restaurant, donated the food and staff, with the only provision being the Mardi Gras Committee would run it.

"I am glad everyone is having a great time," said Mr. Dinner, surveying the scene as everyone tucked into their Carnival King Cake, which capped a meal of creole favourites such as jambalaya, duck, catfish, and seafood. "Leading up to this, the planning, and having the meetings every week, this was something that was weighing on me, but now seeing the setting and everyone having a great time, it is a relief."

In addition to providing the space and the food, Mr. Dinner also had a starring role, along with young "Mardi Gras Prince" Jakob Gatt, in a new video promoting the unit. He said it was special to share the evening with someone like Jakob, who has travelled a similar path.

"I think it touched a lot of people tonight," said Mr. Dinner of the video. "The point of this event is to get that across and we're hoping it affects people as much as it has affected us. [Putting this together] was the least I could do, and when I was approached I was on board right away and it was a no brainer. To get everyone rallied around this cause was a great feeling for me and I loved

every bit of tonight. I hope it will be a success moving forward.?

Saturday's festivities were the first in which Mardi Gras organizers hope will be a new future for the annual fundraiser and serve as a template to other restaurants throughout northern York Region and southern Simcoe County to hold a series of interconnected Mardi Gras events all on the same evening.

Event co-founder Carolyn Hamill said she believes this first foray into the format will do just that, and tentative talks with other restaurants hint at future success.

?I like seeing that we can do small and make it big,? said Ms. Hamill of the new venue. I would like to see other restaurants bring their own interpretation of Mardi Gras there. Obviously there are consistent elements that need to be there like the beads, games, and colours, but there are so many different renditions that you can have.?

Organizers set a goal this year of raising \$10,000 and while numbers are still being crunched, Ms. Hamill says they have exceeded all expectations.

As the traditional Mardi Gras dates next year conflict with Valentine's Day, mark your calendars for the 2015 Bourbon Street Ball on February 7.