

Teacher's new spin on Hoedown "makes it all worthwhile"



By Brock Weir

It was a special evening for thousands as they descended on the now-iconic white tent erected on Magna's Wellington Street campus on Saturday night to take in their Wild, Wild West Hoedown, featuring Dallas Smith as headliner.

As Magna Founder Frank Stronach, joined by Don Walker, the company's current CEO, Aurora Mayor Geoff Dawe, and the Mayors of Newmarket and East Gwillimbury, flipped over the cheque to reveal a whopping \$464,000 has been raised at this year's two-day event for 15 partner charities, they were cheered on by new and veteran attendees alike.

But, the previous day, the Wild, Wild West Hoedown was being experienced by many people from across York Region for the very first time as hundreds of special needs students from the York Region District School Board and the York Catholic District School Board, along with their teachers, parents and caregivers, came in droves to get a taste of the festivities.

The inaugural Special Needs Hoedown was the brainchild of Derek Bunn, a teacher at Sutton District High School.

Pitched to Magna last winter, it was a concept that immediately took hold, although its success had the potential to be marred by labour disruption across both Boards and, indeed, the province. In the intervening months from this initial pitch, however, most of the bones of contention had been resolved, and the path was paved to allow these kids to have a rocking time.

In addition to having some fun under the big top, along with a tasty barbeque, the students were given a flavour of the events big name talent, along with emerging talent in the form of the Top 10 finalists in the annual Hoedown Showdown, including the ultimate winner, Sarah MacRae of King Township.

'This makes it all worthwhile,' said Steve Hinder of Magna for the Community as Aurora's representative in the Top 10, Melissa Suma, took the stage. 'When we were approached [with this idea, Mr. Bunn said, 'I may be way out to lunch with this, this may not even be possible, but do you think we could?' As soon as I heard, I knew we could' and would find a way.

'We had our plans in place, we had our fingers crossed, we knew about the disruption, but these guys were committed, as I think everyone was, to making sure it happened and here we are. It is a huge success and it is great for our contestants because they are getting a chance to perform before a live audience.'

It was a worthwhile endeavour for Mr. Bunn too, who said he was in 'awe and appreciation' to Hoedown for realizing this event.

'When I see this tent decorated out and I see kids with mobility issues coming in, having a meal, and being participants in their community and donating to charities, it makes me feel happy,' said Mr. Bunn. 'We have great talent here today, best cowboys, best cowgirls, enthusiastic schools ' and best dancers too. As soon as they walked in, they felt the buzz of the Hoedown, saw the lights and everything, and they were so welcomed by the local theatre community that is dressed up.

'I want them to know they can access resources in their community. People with special needs are not passers-by, are not passive in the community, but they can be part of something like Hoedown.'

Watching the event unfold was Tyler Barker, chair of Aurora's Accessibility Advisory Committee who, as a young man in a wheelchair, is a passionate advocate for people of all abilities and needs.

'This is a great collaboration with the Boards, the volunteers and the teachers,' he said. 'It just shows how much can be accomplished when people work together. Hopefully this will be even bigger and better next year!'

