

?Unforgettable? Dancing with the Easter Seals Stars event crosses \$1 million fundraising mark in milestone year



Daniella Altieri has always wanted to dance, but that has often proved a difficult task for the long-time Easter Seals Ambassador.

But, as she entered the dance floor at the Royal Venetian Mansion on Thursday night on the arm of Patrick of Aurora's Artistica Ballroom Dance Studio to one of the most iconic tracks from the film *Dirty Dancing*, she quite literally 'Had the Time of Her Life' as, with each effortless-looking move, she helped Easter Seals get ever-closer to helping more kids have the times of their lives as well.

On October 9, the Royal Venetian Mansion was transformed into a red-carpet experience as it played host to the 10th annual *Dancing with the Easter Seals Stars* ? Aurora/Newmarket. The evening, which was built around the theme of *A Night on the Silver Screen*, was a milestone not only in longevity, but in funds raised to help youth with physical challenges live their lives to the fullest ? with this year's efforts handily helping them surpass \$1 million raised over the decade.

Joining Daniella on the dance floor this year were Tracy Smith of Kitchen Table CEOs; restaurateur Martin McQueen; Town of Aurora Cultural Services Manager Phil Rose; lawyer and entrepreneur Jay Willmot; entrepreneur Shabi Monzavil; Aurora Black Community Association founder and president Phiona Durrant; and restaurateur Samantha Buckley.

Expertly guided by Anastasia, Kelly, Patrick and Sarah of the Industrial Parkway South-based Artistica, they overcame nerves, a few last-minute tears, and a pulled muscle here and there, to dance the night away to a host of well-known movie music, united by the shared desire to make the world a better and more accessible place for kids ? and their families.

'I'm truly humbled?by the unwavering commitment of the Aurora-Newmarket community,?' said Kevin Collins, CEO of Easter Seals Ontario at the start of the evening. 'Your presence and generosity, and your shared enthusiasm for our cause, will continue to make a truly meaningful impact for the children we serve, not only within this community, but across this entire province of ours.

'Your support has enabled us to provide over 915 children to access mobility and accessibility equipment already this year?. It's proof of what we can accomplish when we unite behind a shared purpose. But despite the progress, the need for support is growing. As the cost of living continues to climb, families are already managing complex medical needs, they're finding it harder than ever to afford equipment and supports their children rely on every day.

'I wanted to take a moment to [offer] heartfelt appreciation to our dedicated dancers, both professional and amateur, who have poured their passion and dedication into their performances. It's because of you and your efforts we're able to continue to provide

children and youth with physical disabilities the resources and support they need to reach their full potential and achieve their dreams.?

This appreciation was underscored by Easter Seals Ambassador Chloe who shared what being able to go to an Easter Seals camp has meant to her.

'Camp is my favourite place in the world ? it's where I would be all year long, if I could,?' she said. 'It's nice to be somewhere that's fully accessible and I can do all the activities I can't do because we can all do pretty much the same activities and getting to hang out with the counsellors as well is just such an amazing thing. Making friends as someone with a disability, it can be really difficult at places like school where there's a lot of challenges and at camp there are no challenges and I feel like a different person when I'm at camp.

'Thank you for coming and supporting Easter Seals because it really is my favourite place on earth and it's a lot of other kids' favourite place on earth, so you being here and helping us get to this camp is so amazing and it means literally the world to us.?'

Presiding over the competition were community leaders ? and Dancing with the Easter Seals Stars alumni ? Jimmy Brennan, Pegi Reininger, Lynette Lanning, and Marco DiGirolomo.

Smith was first to hit the floor, with Patrick, dancing to 'What A Feeling' from Flashdance, who ultimately took home the Style & Grace Award. Willmot, who secured the Spirit of Easter Seals award when he took to the floor with Kelly to Rocky's 'Eye of the Tiger?', was next, followed by Buckley, whose turn with Anastasia to 'Dance the Night Away' from the Barbie Movie, secured her the Rising Star Award.

Donning a Hercules costume to dance to 'Zero to Hero' from the titular Disney movie with Sarah, McQueen took home the Best Performance in Fundraising Award after raising an impressive \$22,000 for Easter Seals this year.

Helping to round out the evening ? complete with a cartwheel ? was Durrant, who, along with Kelly, had the crowd up on its feet with the musical finale to the 2002 picture Chicago and secured the People's Choice Award; followed by Showstopper Award-winner Monzavil, whose number with Sarah was inspired by 'One in a Million' from Miss Congeniality; and Rose, who, along with Anastasia, reinterpreted the dance moves of John Travolta and Uma Thurman from Pulp Fiction, and took home the Crowd Pleaser Award.

The Shining Star Award went to Altieri, who rose from her wheelchair and quite literally soared across the dance floor, supported by the Artistica team.

'It has been an unbelievable experience ? I've always loved dancing,?' she told the applauding audience. 'Last year when they did the Easter Seals Dance, at the end of the night, I'm like, 'Wow, I wish I could do this.'?'

Patrick, she said, overheard her comment and worked with the team to make this dream come true.

'I think I've talked in the past about what a special event this is, what it gives for kids to be able to be kids who might not otherwise always have the chance,?' said Patrick. 'I've talked to the paper about what Daniella can mean to other kids, but the truth is, it's more than that, I've worked with so many people along this journey, and this is not about, 'Oh, she's special because she did this and she's in a wheelchair,' she's special because she's an incredible young woman.?'

Altieri's mother, Donna, helped drive home what something like this not only meant to her daughter, but also what the evening ? and the organization ? can mean to countless kids and their families.

'I didn't know anything that was going to happen,?' said Donna, wiping away tears. 'She trusted Patrick with her whole heart?'. Daniella's wanted to dance since she was a child, but no dance studio would take her because there wasn't any such thing as that?.'

Then we met Easter Seals and Easter Seals took a shy little girl and turned her into Daniella.

?She's an advocate for kids with disabilities. When a door didn't work at Durham College, she reported it because kids couldn't get through the door. She's become so strong with Easter Seals?. In taking this little girl that stayed in her room all day, and now she works full-time as an early childhood educator at a special needs school, she went on to get a special certificate in autism and behavioural health ? and Easter Seals got her a scholarship.?

Added Easter Seals Ontario's Charlene Myke: ?These are magical moments, and whoever said ?nobody puts baby in a corner' is right. That's what we try to do at Easter Seals. It's not just about not putting Daniella in the corner; it's about putting none of our kids in the corner. It's about kids going to camp, it's about kids getting equipment ? as Donna said, the wheelchair became her legs and that's what allowed Daniella to dance tonight.

?And that's what everybody in the room has helped us do.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter