

York Region's special needs students get pumped for Hoedown



By Brock Weir

Derek Bunn is already pumped ? and what's pumping him up is still just over a week away.

The York Region School Board teacher is starting to lose sleep with excitement for the third annual Student Hoedown, which will take over the Big Top of the Magna Corral on Friday, September 15 for the third year running.

The Student Hoedown, an event tailor-made for special needs students from both the YRDSB and the York Catholic District School Board, is the brainchild of Mr. Bunn, who works with special needs students at Sutton District High School.

Noticing that the Hoedown Tent is only put to special use for a fraction of the time it graces Wellington Street East, he suggested Magna put it to good use for the students.

The result has become a hallmark of the Hoedown weekend and is set to welcome a record 1,000 students, plus teachers and caregivers this year.

?There is excitement in the air,? says Mr. Bunn. ?This is our third time doing it and we always say the third time is the charm, so it is pretty special. It is just having everyone in the tent, the music, the excitement, and the music doesn't even have to play and you can just feel the energy from the kids and the adults coming into the tent. I am pumped!?

If the past two student Hoedowns are any indication, Mr. Bunn and other people instrumental to its organization will arrive at 7.30 a.m.

Students and staff will begin to arrive by 9.30, usually greeted by friendly faces from Magna and Neighbourhood Network, and, of course, a few cows and horses who have trotted over to the occasion.

The tent will already be decked out in hay bales, and other wild, west décor and the atmosphere will be electric.

Soon enough, the cameras and the phones will be out as students snap away, catch up with old friends, and eagerly wait for the party to begin.

Emceed by country singer Beverley Mahood, the entertainment will feature the Top 10 Finalists competing for the Hoedown Showdown.

?Before [the Hoedown I hear from some of the supports] that the students might not be able to do a lot of physical movement as some have such severe physical difficulties, but they are moving in their chairs,? says Mr. Bunn. ?They are wiggling that finger, kicking out that foot, and they have a big smile from ear to ear and that is great. It just means so much to me that they are enjoying the day.

?For the students, even though it is only the second week of school, they are saying it is the best event of the school year! I love to hear that feedback. Neighbourhood Network and Magna go out of their way to accommodate the tent for us, to have a platform for students in wheelchairs so they don't have to go across the bumpy ground. They are very conscious of the noise levels and have the light just a little bit brighter for those who might get nervous in the dark light, maybe lower the volume a little bit, so all those kinds of things make it special. And it informs our community that our students with special needs can contribute; we just have to make some minor accommodations for them to enjoy it.?

With a record number of special needs students ready to descend upon the tent, Mr. Bunn, even with its exceptional growth, says

1,000 might be a pretty good size number for the road ahead. They want it to be a 'manageable, fun opportunity' for everyone and it might lose that special something if it gets too big.

'Sometimes when events get too big, perhaps not everyone's needs can be met safely,' says Mr. Bunn. 'We really try to work with Neighbourhood Network in order to create a safe environment for everyone. I think we really want to recognize this is becoming a staple of the Magna weekend, knowing this is a constant. I have that feeling right now, but we would just like to solidify it more and know this is a yearly event, a contributing event.'

And, importantly for Mr. Bunn, the teachers, caregivers, everyone else involved in making this event a reality, it underscores that this is an event where special needs students can contribute back to their community in a meaningful way.

'There is something for everyone and students and kids are encouraged to get up and dance and to wander around and see people and just have a great time and, of course, contribute to the charities,' he says. 'On a larger GTA basis this is probably one of the largest special needs fundraising events - not fundraising for special needs, but special needs fundraising for charities.'