

Celebrity dancers raise more than \$125,000 for Easter Seals kids



It was a return to the 1980s on Thursday night as community leaders from Aurora and Newmarket laced up for the annual Dancing with the Easter Seals Stars.

Held at the Royal Venetian Mansion on October 5, celebrity participants, led by instructors from Artistica Ballroom Dance Studios, hit the dance floor and, in the process, raised more than \$125,000 to both help send kids with physical disabilities to camp this summer and acquire life-changing, but very costly, mobility devices and other aides to make their lives that much easier.

Taking to the dance floor this year were restaurateur and 2022 Aurora Citizen of the Year Sam Saberi, business owners Raz Khamissa, Tracee Chambers, and Lynnette Lanning, event planner Cortney Cassidy, realtor Chris Cartwright, Bill Gianopoulos, and the evening's top dancer, former teacher and performer Pegi Reininger.

"At the end of the day, it's all about them right here," said Saberi, gesturing to the Easter Seals kids who joined the celebs on the dance floor in a group dance that opened the evening.

Gianopoulos expressed similar sentiments, adding, "This is definitely out of my comfort zone, but [that's] why we're doing it. The reason we're all here is for Easter Seals. It's an amazing organization. It has been a challenge, but it has been an amazing challenge."

The \$125,000+ fundraising total sets a new record for the Aurora-Newmarket edition of Dancing with the Stars and money was raised not only through the sale of individual tickets and tables in the lead-up to October 5, but through a new spin on a live auction. This year, instead of auctioning off items from the floor, attendees were invited to contribute directly to the cause by purchasing batteries for wheelchairs and other mobility devices that can range in cost anywhere between \$500 and \$1,200.

In keeping with the event's 80s theme, references throughout the night to the 1987 flick, "batteries not included" were not just for nostalgia; rather, it was to drive home a very important point on the reality Easter Seals families face every day.

"We celebrated 100 years of existence in 2022 - 100 years of supporting kids, youth, and adults with physical disabilities, providing them with funding for mobility and accessibility equipment," said Kevin J. Collins, President & CEO of Easter Seals Ontario, during a break in the dancing. "We are so proud to have two completely accessible summer camps where kids and all of their family members can come, have a break, have some respite, learn life skills and just be kids.

"We also have our post-secondary school scholarships and all of that happens with the generosity of individuals like yourselves for

being here tonight, to our incredible dance group who is going to put on a great show for us doing what they're doing ? it's all because of them we're able to do good things for these kids.?

Collins, who was born with cerebral palsy, has deep community roots. In the 1970s, he was a young participant in Joe Persechini's fundraising efforts for Easter Seals and went on to also serve as Assistant General Manager of the Aurora Tigers hockey club.

With such a close connection to Easter Seals, Collins said he sees his role as President and CEO of Easter Seals Ontario as one of mentoring kids and providing them with the opportunity to pursue their dreams.

?A lot of kids, particularly coming out of the pandemic, they were dealing with a great deal of isolation. They couldn't go to school, they couldn't go out, and it impacted their need to get the proper assessments,? he said. ?When you look at an individual in a wheelchair or using a walker, that piece of equipment is like a pair of shoes. They outgrow that equipment through the years. With them not being able to have the assessments, there was lots of delays in getting the equipment, and we're now starting to deal with the assessments?. But what's interesting is simple things like toilet aides, shower chairs or lifts are not covered [by government funding]; things that are essential to a family to lift a child from the bed, to a chair, to a doorway, to a bath. That is where the generosity of individuals like yourself come into play so we can provide that funding to make sure we can provide as much independence for those families and those kids as possible.

?One of the toughest decisions I had to make, and I had a chance to go to summer camp eight times when I was a kid and I know the impact that that had on people personally and now professionally, in the 86-year history of our camping programs, we had to close it for two summers because of the pandemic. We created a virtual camping platform so the kids could stay in touch and I am so proud to say we had close to 500 kids back at camp doing what they love to do. Given the opportunity to be in that environment, quite often families are reluctant? it is hard to let your child to get away, but if you have a child with a disability, it is a little more challenging. Once they get to experience camp, kids will tell you it enables their independence. They are in an environment where they are around other kids who are dealing with very similar challenges they are dealing with. They make life-long friendships.?

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