

Events raise cash, and hope, for Haiti

By **LESLIE FERENC** Staff Reporter

Fri., Feb. 12, 2010

It has been a month since tragedy struck Haiti and, as the people of that earthquake-ravaged nation struggle to recover, Canadians continue to open their hearts and wallets to help. As of Thursday, they had donated \$113 million, money that is being matched dollar-for-dollar by the federal government, says International Cooperation Minister Bev Oda. Despite the outpouring of generosity, Haiti's needs remain great. Oda is urging those who have not yet given to make "one final effort, one big push" before the federal government's Friday deadline for matching donations. Support from the Greater Toronto Area has not wavered. People have collected a mountain of shoes, organized shows, sang their hearts out, hiked the Rouge Valley and filled collection plates as they prayed for victims. There have been bake sales and balls, fine dining and school kids selling cookies and paper hearts. There were also Pilates and yoga challenges and an exercise boot camp. Here are some of the local events:

Project Give Back

They will never walk a mile in their shoes, but students at nine Toronto public and private schools are making sure kids in Haiti won't go barefoot.

More than 500 Grade 4 and 5 students from Allenby, Hillcrest, John Ross Robertson, Crestwood, Leo Baeck North and South, USDS Bathurst and Bayview, and Netivot HaTorah schools collected more than 5,000 pairs of shoes. Project Give Back and the students worked with shoe retailer Soft Moc and Soles4Souls to deliver the shoes to earthquake victims.

"This has been such a tangible example of the power of giving and the feelings associated with helping others," Project Give Back CEO Melanie

Levcovich said, adding within days of the launch school hallways overflowed with bags and boxes of shoes. Some were filled with candy, pictures and messages of hope. The student initiative also got support from Telus, Starbucks and Mastermind Toys.

"We were blown away when we heard what these kids were doing, so we wanted to bring our resources to bear to support their efforts," said Jon Levy, co-president of Mastermind. As part of its relief effort and to support the students, the company donated \$1 for every pair of shoes collected.

Helping their brothers and sisters

Toronto's queer community stepped into the spotlight to support victims at a star-studded event that attracted some of the city's big names, including Trey Anthony, writer, producer and star of *Da Kink In My Hair*. Twelve days after the earthquake hit, Ryan Hinds helped pull together a cast of celebrities who entertained a sold-out and often emotional house at Buddies in Bad Times theatre on Jan 24.

The event raised more than \$4,000 for the Canadian Red Cross and an agency working with the lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans community in Haiti. "We wanted to do something to help our gay brothers and sisters in Haiti," Hinds said. "In the midst of such a human crisis, many threads are easy to lose." Members of the audience also paid an emotional tribute to 14 gay activists who were killed while attending a meeting in Haiti's capital the day of the earthquake.

Congregations fill collection plates

Parishioners at Royal York Road United Church gave generously when the collection plate was passed, raising \$1,300 for the Mission and Service Fund of the United Church of Canada, said Thom Norris.

"There is no administration charge. All the money will go to the Methodist Church in Haiti," he said. Norris says he is concerned that some events may not receive matching funding, citing a benefit concert at 2 p.m. Sunday in the sanctuary at Royal York Road United.

Workout Boot Camp

No pain, no gain may well have been on the minds of fitness fiends at the three-hour Buns of Steel Boot Camp held Saturday. "It was all worth it," said camp founder/owner Omar Isuf. "After the marathon, I had an Epsom salt bath and was no worse for wear." Sweat equity raised more than \$4,000 for UNICEF.

Working as a team for a common cause was truly uplifting, he added.

Kids helping kids

Staff and students at schools across the GTA have come up with ingenious ways to support the cause. At Sunnybrook School, silence was truly golden after a No Talkathon raised more than \$18,000.

Children at the Toronto private school were sponsored for every half-hour that passed in silence, said director Irene Davy, adding the Grade 6 students took charge organizing events that included a dress-down day. Students doffed their uniforms and wore red and blue, representing Haiti's national colours, Davy said. Money is being donated to the Red Cross.

Students at E.J. James Public School in Oakville shelled out a toonie for a heart and then pinned them to their classroom doors. Grade 8 teacher Holly Miskelly said her class of 30 upped the ante, paying \$5 per heart and raising almost \$900.

"Our door is fully covered in hearts along with a massive border to the classroom door," she said. "The generosity and motivation that the kids have had throughout this time has literally brought tears to my eyes." Money raised by the school is being donated to the Red Cross.

Robert F. Hall Catholic Secondary School in Caledon raised more than \$17,000 in one day by holding a dress-down day. Money was donated to the Canadian Development and Peace Organization, the largest single amount received by that agency to date.

Staff and students at Agincourt Collegiate raised more than \$10,000 in two weeks through donations and in-school events. Money will support World Vision.

Jamaican Canadian Association

More than 600 people attended Hands Across Haiti, a fundraiser organized by the Jamaican Canadian Association. The event raised more than \$11,000 for Pierspective Entraide Humanitaire, a registered Canadian charity established by the Haitian Consulate and community in Ontario, said Sylvanus Thompson, chair of the association's education and cultural committee.

"There is a sense of kinship among all people of the Caribbean," he said, referring to the overwhelming support from the community. Among the guests was Nigel Smith of the Jamaican Consulate to Toronto and Dr. Eric Pierre, Haiti's honorary consul-general to Toronto. A cheque presentation was held Thursday at the association's Arrow Rd. headquarters.

Eat, Drink and Give

Wining and dining was on the menu at Eat, Drink and Give, an event that paired local and international wineries with some of Toronto's hottest eateries.

"Eat, Drink and Give was a social media-fuelled culinary event that brought together the very best of Ontario food and wine with an added international flavour," said co-organizer Joel Solish, adding Roy Thomson Hall donated the space and many private collectors and wineries contributed to the silent auction.

"The mood at the event was celebratory for what was being accomplished, but there was an underlying tone of concern for what had happened to the Haitian people."

Wednesday's event attended by 300 foodies raised \$45,000 for Doctor's Without Borders.

Chefs For Haiti

Some of Toronto's top female chefs – including Therese de Grace and Karen Balcom of Lola's Commissary; Olivia Bolano of All the Best Fine Foods; Katherine Hall of Hall's Kitchen; and Brenda Kwong Hing of Delicious Catering – created a mouth-watering seven-course Haitian-themed dinner Wednesday. Funds raised will be donated to Doctors Without Borders.

"It was an incredible evening," said Esther Benaim, owner of Great Cooks on Eight and Great Cooks and the T Spot. The gourmet evening began with a Caribbean punch that set the mood. About 60 guests nibbled on Haitian-inspired delicacies. "There was a real feeling of friendship and camaraderie all around a good cause," said Benaim. The event raised almost \$8,000.

Markham Miracle

The Town of Markham and Free the Children, along with various community groups, joined forces to raise \$250,000 for Free the Children.

"I'm proud of the way our community has come together – government, police, residents and community organizations – to support those in desperate need," said York Regional Police Chief Armand La Barge.

Two events brought in almost \$50,000. A portion of funds (\$18,000) raised at this year's Toronto Paragon Lions Club Annual Charity Ball held Feb. 7 are being donated to Markham Miracle and Red Cross Haiti Relief.

The gala also made a donation to Markham Stouffville Hospital.

Close to 1,000 people broke bread together at a community dinner Wednesday at the Markham Event Centre.

The family meal, with food donated by restaurants in Markham, North York and Scarborough, raised close to \$40,000. Of that, \$21,000 was a contribution from Toronto Paragon Lions Club.

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