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'Dancing with the Stars' theme for Plymouth Housing Group benefit may inspire other galas

Local 'celebrity' dancing spices up benefit

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There was a whole lot of shakin' going on. And dipping. And lifting. And tearing off of clothes to reveal much scantier outfits beneath.

These were just some of the dance moves by business and civic leaders that held a packed house spellbound at Seattle's Fremont Studios on March 13, as hundreds of supporters gathered there for Seattle Dances, a first-time event to benefit Plymouth Housing Group and to celebrate 30 years of extraordinary service to the community.

Plymouth strives to eliminate homelessness by offering safe, decent, affordable housing and opportunities to stabilize and improve the lives of some of the most challenged people in our community — touching thousands of them over its three decades.

While the mission of Plymouth Housing Group is serious, the evening, inspired by ABC's hit show "Dancing with the Stars," was full of life, creativity and joy unleashed. Plymouth knows how to put on a party. Event co-chair Lynn Beck, also president of the Plymouth Housing Group board and Pine Street Group developer, conceived of this fresh new fundraising twist, and was pleased with how it turned out. The event raised \$415,000 that night, with more money still coming in.

"Incredible," she says. "Through the 'celebrity' dancers we reached a whole new audience. Half the crowd were new (to PHG), which is so important as we look to create new awareness of Plymouth and its vision." A short auction portion led off the evening, with gracious auctioneer Sharon Friel and her rocker son Rick hawking 19 items, including an upfront and personal trip to "The Ellen DeGeneres Show." Then the lights went down, all except flashes of shimmering glints from an enormous spotlighted mirrored ball turning slowly above the crowd.

With the crowd hushed, three judges took their places at a table on stage — Peter Boal, artistic director of Pacific Northwest Ballet; Nicole Vogel, publisher of Seattle Metropolitan magazine; and Marco, owner of Marco Two Union Square, a full service beauty salon in Seattle.

Then out came the dancers, couple by couple, seven business and community leaders who had been trained for months by, and were dancing with, professional dance instructors from the Century Ballroom: Michelle Foreman Barnet, president of Columbia West Properties; Kathy Casey, president of Kathy Casey Food Studios; Colette Courtion, CEO of Calidora Skin Clinics; Steve Goldfarb, president of Alvin Goldfarb Jeweler; Cathi Hatch, founder of Zino Society; an ebullient Paul Lambros, executive director of Plymouth Housing Group; and Joyce Taylor, KING TV anchor.

I was on stage the whole time as emcee and can tell you that although their perspiration was flying, somehow the dancers kept their cool as they took their turns in the spotlight, dipping without dropping, flipping without skipping — a beat. They wowed the crowd and themselves with their skills and their uncanny ability to take on a persona worthy of “Chorus Line.” They had fun. They hammed it up. They lapped up the judges’ verbal strokes. And they raised money in real time, as the audience decided on the “people’s choice.” Each dancer stood panting after performing, while the crowd raised their paddles at various levels, raising a total of \$78,000 in that portion alone.

And while all the numbers were being tallied for three main awards, two champion 9-year-old ballroom dancers, Erik Linder and Rickie Taylor, took the stage and charmed the audience with their prowess. It was clear to see how the Everett pair almost won “America’s Got Talent” when they were 8 years old.

In the end, Hatch won the award for people’s choice, raising the most money that night; Barnet walked off with the cyber award, bringing in big bucks online before the event; while the leggy Courtion, channeling Beyoncé in some of her moves, was the judges’ favorite.

This event sets the bar high for creativity and innovation in local fundraisers, some of which take a similar tone year after year. Instead, at Plymouth, they kicked up their heels. Literally. And let down their hair. And they are already getting requests from people who want to perform in 2011.

For next year, I nominate Melinda Gates, Bruce McCaw, Jody Patton, Chuck or Karen Lytle, Edgar Martinez and Matt Hasselbeck, most of whom would probably say, ‘Yes, we’ll do it!’ Toni Hoffman, Ken Alhadeff and Chad MacKay would be fantastic as well. The mind runs wild.

It will be fascinating to see who a Plymouth panel will ask to dance, considering the mission is to raise big funds for a great cause. Even more fascinating will be to see how other organizations spice up their fundraising efforts as a result.

Meanwhile, on Feb. 27, much to the delight of chairs Lynn and Mike Garvey, the 18th annual UW Medicine Salute Harborview gala grossed \$2.1 million, a record level of support for this event, and a 72 percent increase over last year! Remember those two teenagers buried for hours on Snoqualmie Pass when an ice cave collapsed in August of 2008? The two survivors, Alec Corbett and Alessandro Gelmini, expressed their deep gratitude to the Harborview doctors and nurses at the event, captivating 800 people in the audience.