

Dancing for dollars

Celebrities battled for ballroom dancing supremacy to raise money for scholarships

By Kyla Woodard
For Clay Today

ORANGE PARK- Seven 'celebrities' put their dancing shoes on and 'cha-cha-chaed' to the beat last Friday night – all in the name of raising money for local scholarships.

The first Battle of The Ballroom was a star-studded event hosted by the Florida Federated Republican Women Fleming Island. Held at the Thrasher-Horne Center, the occasion aimed to raise money for county students seeking vocational scholarships.

"The spike in tuition cost, educational cost, living cost ... anyway we can help those to avoid long-term debt because of education through vocational scholarships is a win-win for everyone, especially our students in Clay County," said FFRWF President Ruth Swissa.

The "celebrities" featured Assistant Superintendent for Business Affairs Dr. Susan Legutko, District 1 School Board Member Erin Skipper, UK actor William Tapley, entrepreneur Kaya Frechette, entrepreneur Susana Bentley, Clay Young Republicans Chair Ted Clark and Founder of the Mass Exodus Movement Quisha King.

Before the event, each celebrity participant campaigned to raise donations for the cause. Along with donations, sponsorships were also available for the public to purchase.

Like the popular TV show, 'Dancing With the Stars', all seven dancers partnered with professionals to perform ballroom numbers and vie for the coveted "mirror ball trophy."

Dressed to the nines, guests donned elegant gowns and tailored suits at the event, aiming to pull off the extravagant 'Rodeo Drive' theme. To begin the event, attendees could mingle and eat a Mediterranean-style dinner. Elegant white covers dressed tables while light music filled the room.

In addition to mingling, guests could participate in a silent auction during the dinner, bidding on items such as certificates and gift baskets.

The scholarship was also awarded during the dinner, with scholar Judy Null being announced as the recipient. In total, the event raised \$8,035 for Null's vocational pathway. Guests filtered into the studio theater to witness the anticipated dancing. Along with the dancers, judges Sheriff Michelle Cook, Senator Jennifer Bradley and professional judge Stass dedicated their time to giving helpful critiques on each performance.

Sheriff Cook said her decision to participate in the fun event was easy.

"I think this is the first time we've had something like this in our community. It's



something fun, and it's something different... at the end of the day, we're raising money to provide scholarships for young ladies," Cook said.

One by one each contestant, wearing sparkly and flashy ensembles, took their turn, leaving it all on the dance floor. From upbeat tunes to intense melodies to full blown lifts, the engaging performances had the crowd cheering and applauding their way through the dance.

First up was King, who scored 27 points for her dance. In her post-dance remarks, King said she and her partner started training for her dance three months ago. She noted her favorite part about the whole experience was the fact that it was unfamiliar territory.

"It was something that I had never done before...so, it was really cool to kind of stretch myself and do some ballroom dancing," King said. "And, [of] course, I had a fantastic teacher."

Next up was Clark, who scored a total of 24.5 points. Skipper followed, scoring the first perfect score of 30 points. The judges raved over Skipper's song choice, noting she was 'unstoppable' on the dance floor.

"First of all, that music, you are unstoppable," Senator Bradley said.

Legutko was next with a total of 26 points. In her post-dance remarks, Legutko said her dance took her three weeks to



learn. Next was Tapley, with 28.5 points. In his post-dance remarks, Tapley said his travel from London was a reason for his fatigue.

"Well, I'm jet-lagged. I'm not sure if that helped," Tapley said.

Frechette with a perfect score of 30, while Bentley had a 29.5. In the end, however, only one winner prevailed. As a result of an apparent tie and more deliberations by the judges, Frechette was titled the queen of the ballroom. Frechette held up her trophy in victory as the crowd cheered her on.

To end the night, the professional dancers came together to perform their routine, dazzling the audience one last time.

Swissa said finding the right people to be involved was relatively easy, as it was



PHOTOS BY KYLA WOODARD

Local celebrities danced for dollars to support local scholarships last Friday night at the Thrasher-Horne Center. Entrepreneur Kaya Frechette, School Board member Erin Skipper finished with perfect scores. Judges deliberated and awarded Frechette the mirror ball trophy in a tiebreaker.

all about finding the ones who would bring positive fun to the dance floor. Additionally, Swissa said it was essential to find people who are dedicated to education.

"If you meet these individuals in person, they're very funny, they've got a great sense of humor, and they have a passion for scholarships," Swissa said. "They have a passion for education."

For the future, Swissa said she hopes to continue to use fun events like the Battle of the Ballroom to raise awareness for the dire need of vocational opportunities and allow local students to shine. "I really hope that...people recognize the importance of vocational scholarships, and that we have some really smart students here in Clay County and that we need to invest in them. We really do," Swissa said.

NEW IN FLEMING ISLAND



3535 Hwy 17, Suite 12
(904) 732-0828
info@genesisbrothersinc.com

- Demolition
- Tile Installation
- Hardwood Installation
- Bath Remodeling
- Kitchen Remodeling
- Design Consulting