

DO GOOD

STORY BY KAREN PATON-EVANS

Their Gala This Year Helps
Nourish Needy Schoolkids

DIVAS

THE GENERAL BELIEF is that doing good for the sake of others makes a person feel good in return. But when you add bonuses such as designer handbags, celebrity cache, glamorous fashions, auction excitement and chocolate, the good deed feels even better!

Approximately 60 Do Good Divas and several Do Good Dudes are doing what they can to ensure that more than 18,000 students won't go hungry at 72 elementary ▶



Above: The Do Good Divas are (l-r) Barb Holland, Gale Simko-Hatfield and Lucy Fanson.

and secondary schools in our region. This autumn, the not for profit service club is hosting its third annual "Diva Delights: A Girl's Night Out Featuring Flowers, Fashions and Fabulous Handbags". The Do Good Divas community group created their signature event to benefit health related causes and so on Thursday, October 22nd, the volunteers will be working to support the Jumpstart Student Nutritional Program.

Diva president Gale Simko-Hatfield, who is chairperson of the Greater Essex County District School Board, and Barbara Holland, Diva secretary treasurer and Windsor Essex Catholic District School Board trustee, have heard the frontline reports of area children trying to make it through the day on empty bellies. "We were both very aware that there were lots of hungry kids at school," says Gale.

She and Barbara went to Diva vice president Lucy Fanso with their concerns and asked for the support of Jumpstart, which provides students with breakfast and healthy snacks in the schools. Lucy was immediately on board, saying, "What a Diva thing to do! We have to feed the kids."

Gale says, "We approached Jumpstart and said, 'If you're interested, we'd like to help out.' The coordinator started crying."

Based on the successes of prior Diva Delights, the Do Good Divas anticipate their event will be sold out. Last year, the 860 seats available were sold simply by word of mouth, well in advance of scheduled advertising. To avoid disappointing anyone who wants to attend this year, the Divas have added more tables and increased their seating to accommodate 1,000 guests at the Caboto Club in Windsor.

Most of the guests have been women, many coming as they are, straight from work. "I know in talking with women that it's hard to get husbands to go to events," says Gale. In envisioning a fundraiser that would have great appeal, she thought, "Okay; so let's give the men the night off and let the women have a lot of fun."

Some men do attend, a few even buying tables and playing host to their favourite ladies. Last year a businessman hosted women clients at his table. When the ladies oohed and aahed over the celebrity handbags and designer evening gowns, the gentleman wore a big smile.

The Divas are glad to see everyone having a super time. The good vibe comes in

large part from the authentic desire to help those in need. The rest emanates from the informal lighthearted spirit and the buzz of enjoyable activity. After the doors open at 5 pm, guests energize at the open coffee bar sponsored by Tim Hortons. They sit down for dinner and then take a tempting trip to the dessert and candy buffet. Calories are effortlessly worked off by ogling the hundreds of handbags in the silent auction, checking raffle tickets for winning numbers, clapping hands to applaud elegant Diva Boutique gowns worn by the shop's lovely models, flinging hands in the air to bid on drop dead gorgeous designer handbags, and nearly leaping out of seats to go one higher on coveted handbags donated by big name celebrities.

"It's a busy event," Gale modestly notes.

"One of our highlights is the fabulous dessert and candy buffet," she says. "It got wiped out last year." Local bakeries and businesses donate the confections, with delectable chocolate as the main feature. "Diva Delights focuses on handbags and chocolate – the things women like!"

More treats are in store this year from high school students. Culinary program participants will be donating desserts while student musicians will be providing live entertainment.

At the microphone and behind the scenes, the Do Good Divas and Dudes keep the pace moving. The evening is hosted by Diva charter members Karen Hall of The Windsor Star and Susan Pedler, CBC-TV News anchor. Do Good Dude and Windsor City Councillor Percy Hatfield is the live on stage auctioneer.

"It takes a large crew to put this on," Gale observes. Along with divaship comes the expectation that Divas and Dudes will give of their time at fundraising events, and every pair of hands is required.

One of the biggest tasks is obtaining the handbags for the live auction. "I work on that all year," Gale admits. "I do a big happy dance when I actually get something because it does take a lot of work and it's very difficult."

At the two previous events, guests were thrilled to bid on bags donated by Celine Dion, Teri Hatcher, Sarah Jessica Parker, Patty Duke, Rachel McAdams and Eva Longoria Parker. Last year, Kellie Pickler not only sent a bag.....she added a red high heel shoe, autographed, as a memento of her hit song "Red High Heels".

"There is always lively bidding on the celebrity bags," Gale finds. She is

keeping mum about the celebrities who have sent handbags for this October's Diva Delights, but guests are in for wonderful surprises.

Designers also contribute bags for the live auction. The Windsor Hugo Boss store gave a handsome handbag for the 2008 event.

Last year, the Zekelman Foundation donated a Judith Leiber creation from the luxury crystal and silk collection. "You can't even buy a Judith Leiber in Windsor, so it was very special," says Gale.

Just as important are the handbags donated by Windsor area individuals, retailers and businesses. Collectively, they provided just under 400 handbags for the silent auction in 2008.

When the Divas were organizing their first event in 2007, they asked family and friends to contribute unused handbags from their own closets. Then the Divas approached retailers, who were excited to select beautiful bags from their stock. "I think for the individuals and retailers who donate bags, each year the excitement grows," Gale says.

"Even businesses that aren't in the bag business will buy a handbag or donate a gift basket that is related to bags." The Divas are always touched by the thought and generosity which have obviously gone into each donation.

Other sponsors furnish money which is most welcome and used to meet expenses encountered in putting on the event.

Many donors attend Diva Delights for the fun of it. "They love it!" Gale says. "This is not a gala; it's a big purse party!"

In more ways than one. At past events, guests have opened their own handbags...wide...to support the Do Good Divas' good work. Ticket sales and guests' enthusiastic bidding at the 2007 Diva Delights raised \$50,000 to fund the renovation of five busy waiting rooms at Hôtel-Dieu Grace Hospital. The 2008 event brought in \$30,000 to aid a project at the Windsor Regional Cancer Centre.

"This year, we're hoping we can give the Jumpstart Student Nutritional Program \$50,000," Gale says. To help make that happen, you may reserve your seat or table at Diva Delights by calling the Diva Hotline at 519-735-0211.

A single ticket is \$55. A table for 10 guests is \$500. Admission includes dinner, the dessert and candy buffet and the Tim Hortons coffee bar. Major credit cards are accepted.