

## SPECIAL-NEEDS BENEFIT RAISES \$80,000



STAFF PHOTOS BY MICHAEL KARAS

Bryan Rosenberg and Kim Youmans acknowledging applause at the Westmount Country Club in Woodland Park.

## Cheers, tears for dancers

By **MELANIE ANZIDEI**  
STAFF WRITER

When 62-year-old Mark Sagui took center stage at the Westmount Country Club in Woodland Park, he was doing something that as a kid he always refused.

"Never in a million years did I think I would dance," said Sagui, recalling how "incredible" the applause sounded as he waltzed to the tune of "All I Ask of You" from "The Phantom of the Opera" musical.

Dressed in black pants and vest, with a white shirt and a red bow tie, Sagui, who uses a power chair because he has multiple sclerosis, inspired the crowd of more than 250 guests to stand and applaud as he and his partner glided across the dance floor. At certain points, Sagui lifted his partner, Diane Discepolo, and slowly spun her around as the crowd rained down its applause.

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Jonathan Haar and partner Stacey Nonas had all the right moves Wednesday evening. They danced for more than 250 guests.



Mark Sagui, 62, with Diane Discepolo, said he didn't think "there was a dry eye in the audience" after their routine for "Dancing With Our Stars," a fundraiser to help build homes for the developmentally disabled.

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“I don’t think there was a dry eye in the audience,” he said of the performance.

Sagui, a three-year resident of Crescent Commons, a special-needs housing development in Alendale, was one of about 25 individuals with developmental disabilities who performed Wednesday evening for the “Dancing With Our Stars” fundraiser hosted by non-profits Bergen County’s United Way and the Madeline Corp. The event raised \$80,000 that will go toward construction capital to build independent-living facilities for those with special needs, like the place Sagui calls home.

According to Gina Plotino, vice president of programs and operations for Bergen County’s United Way, the dancers prepared for their 30-minute performances for three months. Each week, they

would meet with their instructors, who included Discepolo and Denice D’Alessio of Roll Call Wheelchair Dance in Pearl River, N.Y., to learn the basics of several different dance routines.

“One of the things that has been so eye-opening about our work is every time we think the individuals we work with have reached their potential, they surprise us,” said Plotino. “This [event] presented a way for them to challenge themselves.”

The dancers performed a variety of numbers on Wednesday that included a Viennese waltz, a musical revue, the fox trot, tango, swing, cha-cha, meringue, salsa, mambo and contemporary West Coast swing.

After a vibrant finale, when all the performers danced to Walk the Moon’s popular single “Shut Up and Dance,” the guests joined the group in a conga line.

The dancers ranged in age from their 20s to their 60s. Their costumes also varied by dance. For the opening act, which was the Viennese waltz to Seal’s “Kiss from a Rose,” the women wore white with floral accessories, and the men wore black suits with white dress shirts. For the cha-cha, the ladies changed into neon pink ripped shirts.

Molly Swift, a 25-year-old who lives at the organizations’ special-

needs complex in Tenafly, said some of her favorite performances were the cha-cha and tango.

“I never thought I’d be able to show off my dance moves to all those people,” she said. “Honestly, I was really nervous dancing in front of my parents. But as soon as I saw them, I was able to do it.”

Proceeds from the event will go toward building “Special Homes for Very Special People.” United Way, in partnership with the Madeline Corp., has been building these homes since 2004, to meet the needs of individuals with developmental disabilities so they can live independently.

To Sagui, a Wyckoff native and former volunteer firefighter with the borough, being able to raise funds for others in need was his way of “giving back to the community.”

According to the non-profits, there are an estimated 50,000 adults in New Jersey with developmental disabilities, and 8,000 of them are on waiting lists for supportive housing. The organizations plan to build 22 more homes in Bergen, Passaic, Morris and Middlesex counties. Four of those homes are in progress in Fort Lee, Mahwah, Montvale and Glen Rock.

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