

COVER | STORY



Divas ... divine




“Everyone is going to have a great time, but we’re there fighting something that a lot of people forget is an incredibly huge issue.”

Local songbirds to soar in annual benefit concert

BY MATT GLEASON
World Scene Writer

So many memories floated to the surface as Rebecca Ungerman looked back over the all-star music extravaganzas that are Divas benefit concerts for H.O.P.E.

Each year — going on five years now — the local performer has banded together with elite local singers to blow the Performing Arts Center’s roof off to help raise money for Health Outreach Prevention Education (H.O.P.E.).

The local organization’s aim is prevention education about HIV/AIDS, hepatitis and other sexually-transmitted infections. It’s the only statewide 24-hour HIV/STD hotline, and the only free, anonymous testing and counseling facility in Northeastern Oklahoma.

Ungerman’s fond memories ranged from the hilarious — like the time host Jason Ashley Wright tripped over his mike stand — to the incredible, like the late Debbie Campbell’s awe-inspiring performance of “Nearness of You.”

One of the most poignant moments in Divas history, Ungerman said, came when Pam Van

Dyke-Crosby spoke about her son, Isaac, who died of AIDS-related pneumonia in the mid-’90s.

“It reminds us why we’re here,” Ungerman said. “That’s the thing, this is a great show. This is fun. This is entertaining and everyone is going to have a great time, but we’re there for a reason.

“We’re there fighting something that a lot of people forget is an incredibly huge issue.”

Van Dyke-Crosby, who has spoken about her son more than once during the Divas show, said playing the benefit concert has special meaning.

“It’s a way that I can give back and can honor his memory,” she said.

This year’s lineup, as in previous years, features some of the most acclaimed female singers in town: Ungerman, Van Dyke-Crosby, Cindy Cain, Christy Hanewinkel, Annie Ellicott and Mary Cogan.

Plus, two local theater divas, Heather Richetto-Rumley and Meredith Lee Weger, will perform.

And, oh yeah, the only male diva, John Sawyer. Jason Ashley Wright, the Tulsa World’s style reporter, and Chera Kimiko from television station KOKI, channel 23, will co-host the event.

Each diva will perform a solo number in the show’s first half.

Then, in the second half, Sawyer and Richetto-Rumley will perform the Kenny Rogers/Sheena Easton duet “We’ve Got Tonight.”

Ungerman pointed out the pair “will do it so much cooler than Kenny and Sheena ever thought about doing it.”

Elliott and Van Dyke-Crosby will take on Harry Woods’ “Side by Side.”

And what of Hanewinkel and Cogan’s duet?

“That’s all you get,” Ungerman whispered, unwilling to reveal all her show’s many secrets.

However, it’s no secret that the crowd can expect a group encore, which Ungerman said won’t come cheap.

Like firefighters on Labor Day, the Divas will walk around the venue with boots made for preening — drag queen boots.

If the crowd fills those fabulous boots with cash, the reward will be a rousing version of the traditional encore ditty, “I’m a Woman,” the bluesy ode about a superwoman who “can starch and iron two dozen shirts ‘fore you can count from one to nine,” because she’s a “woman, W-O-M-A-N.”

Those kind of collaborations are what make the annual shindig a blast, Ungerman said.


“I always kind of call it my playground,” she said, “. . . and the fact that we’re doing something that raises money for such a great cause, what could be better? There’s nothing better.”

DIVAS 2006

When: 8 p.m. Saturday

Where: Liddy Doenges Theatre of the Tulsa Performing Arts Center, Second Street and Cincinnati Avenue

Tickets: \$15-\$25, at MyTicketOffice.com, 596-7111, hope-testing.org



The rest of the Divas: Cindy Cain (left), Rebecca Ungerman, Heather Richetto-Rumley, Mary Cogan and Annie Ellicott.

Photos by Carol Curry