

Nutcracker with a heart in Hyannis

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Hyannis-- 12/17/11-- Sugarplum fairy Tory Hitchcock has the eyes of the little sugarplums at the Dancing For A Cure performance at Barnstable High School Saturday. **Cape Cod Times/Steve Heaslip**

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HYANNIS — There's Clara, the Sugarplum Fairy and the Snow Queen, but Dancing For A Cure isn't your typical "Nutcracker."

Hyannis-based Dance Designs school owner Susan Mendoza Friedman calls her show, which has in six years raised more than \$100,000 for breast and ovarian cancer research, "The Nutcracker with a heart."

The performance includes selections from "The Nutcracker," as well as interpretative dances and musical numbers.

Along with the two shows at Barnstable High School Saturday, the final performance is today.

For those wishing to see "The Nutcracker," the quintessential scenes are covered by dancers from preschool age through young adulthood, many of whom have trained for years in classical ballet. And the Waltz of the Snowflakes, Waltz of the Flower and the Chinese, Russian and Arabian dances are all there.

But what makes this show special is the purpose behind it.

If You Go

Final performance today: Barnstable High School Knight Auditorium, 2 p.m.

Tickets: \$15 adult, \$5 child. Benefits Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, ovarian and breast cancer research

Midway through the dances at Saturday's first show, three little girls in dance costumes walked up to a microphone.

Aurelia Reynolds, 12, from Sandwich, introduced herself. Her little sister, Juliana Reynolds, 7, held her big sister's hand as Aurelia talked about the time their mother was diagnosed with cancer.

"My little sister was 3 and I was 8," she said. "It was really scary. I was terrified."

She hated to see her mother's bald head because it reminded her of what was happening.

After a year of treatment, her mother recovered. The sisters perform in Dancing For A Cure annually as a way to share what they went through.

"I don't want anyone else to experience the fear my sister and I felt that year," Aurelia said.

Alexandra Bernardo, 13, and her mother, Jennifer Rako of Chatham, were involved with Dancing For A Cure from the beginning. For years, Alexandra danced with the ballet students, and Rako performed with the adult tap dancers.

But just a month before the 2009 show, Rako was diagnosed with cancer.

The first year was hard, Alexandra said.

"My mom had just had her surgery, and she couldn't dance," she said. "It was a little sad and scary that year."

Rako pulled through and is one of the 20 members of the all-female Dancing For A Cure Committee.

In the beginning

Mendoza Friedman began the fundraiser following her best friend's diagnosis of ovarian cancer in 2005.

Six years later, this friend, Karen Schek, of Pound Ridge, N.Y., remains an inspiration, Mendoza Friedman said during Saturday's show.

"In the past few months, Karen has taught me many new lessons," she said.

These include, unfortunately "end-of-life issues," such as "the immense importance of saying 'I love you' whenever possible," she said.

The odds of getting cancer in your lifetime is 1 in 2 for men and 1 in 3 for women. That's why the 20 women work tirelessly for Dancing For A Cure, she said, and it's probably also why the show sells out nearly every year, and why hundreds donate.

Sometimes parents of young dancers switch dance schools to be a part of a dance program with a special mission.

"Dance can be so judgmental," added choreographer Kelly Quealy. "This is something else."

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