

Boot Scootin' Barn Dance raises money for youth organizations



Students put their newly learned dancing skills to the test during CROYA's Boot Scootin' Barn Dance Sunday, Feb. 10 at Lake Forest Recreation Center. Alex Newman/22nd Century Media

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Attendees at Committee Representing Our Young Adults's (CROYA) Boot Scootin' Barn Dance Fundraiser on Sunday, Feb. 10 were clad in flannel plaid, cowboy boots and hats and happily participating in line dancing. Benefitting the CROYA and Ellie Burns Foundation, the event attracted a few hundred youth, parents and other members of the Lake Forest and Lake Bluff communities.

The goal of CROYA is to help young adults identify and meet their own needs, while learning values and self worth, per its website. They operate from a dedicated space in Lake Forest's Recreation Center and offer programming that includes an after school drop-in center, Wednesday evening events, field trips, fall and spring retreats and a summer Habitat for Humanity service trip.

Henry Sachman, treasurer of the CROYA Foundation board was in attendance. "The foundation handles expenses outside of general operating funds," he explained.

The Ellie Burns Foundation was started in memory of Elli Burns, of Lake Forest, who loved camping and nature and helping others but was killed on a camping trip. After that tragedy, her family established the foundation to provide scholarships to youth for trips that give them outdoor adventures and/or the chance to help others.

“The purpose of the foundation is to honor Ellie’s legacy,” said her mother Sally Burns, speaking before the live auction. “The object of the trip is you can choose where you go as long as your [supporting] organization is a 501(c)(3),” she explained about the scholarship parameters.

Frances Hickey, an LFHS junior and Burns Foundation scholarship recipient, went on a cultural exchange trip to Cambodia for two and a half weeks, thanks to the scholarship. She was in a group of eight high school students who went to schools in Cambodia to teach English to the students.

“It was the happiest trip I’ve ever taken,” Hickey said. “It would never have been possible if the Burns had not created the foundation. I will go on the rest of my life trying to embody Ellie’s values.”

Some of the other participants at the fundraiser were Lake Forest College students Abby Samuelson and Arthur Simenas. They were both interns at CROYA and continue as part-time employees while they complete their college degree programs this spring.

“CROYA altered the path of my life. When I started working with these kids, it allowed me to find my passion,” Samuelson said.

For the occasion, CROYA’s student union was transformed into a western scene with checkered tablecloths, bushels of straw and a game of horseshoes, plus entertainment by line dance caller Lottie Buckbee and the band Union Folk.

“This event is one way to showcase the meaningful things we do,” said CROYA Manager Todd Nahigian, who has worked for the organization for the last 24 years of its 39 years in existence.

Meghan Gayter, the organization’s high school youth worker, noted that someone on the adult board came up with the idea for the barn dance, and the kids really ran with it. She said they have a 24-member student executive board that meets once a month to plan activities.

The culmination of the fundraiser was a live auction that included a LFHS parking spot for the 2019-20 school year, Lollapalooza tickets, Chicago Cubs tickets, Lake Forest Fourth of July VIP passes and a golf foursome at the Deerpath Golf Course. There was also a “reverse auction” in which people could donate various amounts of money represented by a pyramid, with \$100,000 at the bottom and \$50 at the top. Donors started coming in at the \$500 level and won merchandise packages from both CROYA and the Ellie Burns Foundation.

At the end of the Barn Dance fundraiser, Nahigian noted, “We’re very thankful to the communities of Lake Forest and Lake Bluff for continuing to support the youth.”