

Time to have a ball: Masquerade with Charitable Purpose

Event hopes to help AIDS victims in Africa

Katherine Dedyne, Times Colonist

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Masks, mystery and mingling in the Fairmont Empress Crystal ballroom will combine to assist the children of Africa at the fourth annual Victoria Masquerade Ball on Sept. 27.

It's your big chance to go incognito -- in full costume or just from the neck up -- with proceeds expected to reach \$25,000.

While in previous years, the majority of attendees wore fanciful masks with ball gowns, tuxes or suits, the number arriving in full costume is growing.



Charlotte Rennison, who will be attending the Victoria Masquerade Ball in aid of Unicef Canada, models a dress and a few of the many masks she has available for rent.

Debra Brash, Times Colonist

"More people seem to be catching the fever," says event chairman John Vickers. "One couple goes to Venice each year and they bring

a new costume back."

Some costumes channelling 17th-century Europe are "just phenomenal" and prevent wearers from arriving in vehicles.

The couple who won best costume last year spent six months creating their extravaganzas, he adds.

Kristiane Baskerville has been to every ball and loves it.

"Visually, it's beautiful," says the owner of Surroundings on Cook Street, who'll wear a mask she describes as "India meets Alien."

"Because everyone's in a mask, I find it's a great mingle."

An assortment of masks made of feathers, sequins and faux jewels designed by Linda Hiney are for sale at her store for about \$45.

So far, the balls have raised about \$50,000. This year's charity is UNICEF's Unite for Children, Unite Against AIDS Campaign -- a global effort that helps eliminate mother-to-child transmission of the disease that has ravaged Africa.

Guest speaker will be UNICEF Canada CEO Nigel Fisher.

"I try to make it not totally a fundraiser in that it's also a fantastic night out for the public and at the same time it's all in support of a good cause," Vickers says.

The event also partners with Victoria Costumes.com.

Owner Charlotte Rennison has more than 1,000 costumes, from colonial governor to medieval babe, available for \$30 to \$75 for four days. She intends to sport at least five hoops, in the style of Marie Antoinette.

The ball is not just for couples. Two tables of 12 are set aside for those coming single. And age is no barrier, either: The youngest person to buy a ticket is 17, the oldest 83, Baskerville notes.

The event seats 270, with about 60 tickets at \$95 apiece still for sale.

Included in the 7 p.m.-to-midnight event are high-end appetizers, a nine-piece swing band and a special performance by Ballet Victoria.

There's a cash bar and a silent auction for everything from a weekend for two at the Fairmont Banff Springs Hotel to dinner for six prepared by the Victoria Fire Department.

"The Crystal ballroom is going to be decorated to the hilt," Vickers adds.

Known around town for his pumpkin art, Vickers runs a technology company and started the balls for African AIDS relief in 2005.

His father, who worked at St. Francis Xavier University in New Brunswick, used to invite African students to stay at the family home when he was growing up, spurring his interest and commitment to the continent.

Corporate sponsors are the Victoria branch of the Canadian Home Builders' Association and Blaney's Travel. Media sponsors are the Times Colonist, Shaw, A-Channel and C-FAX.

For tickets, visit Surroundings at 249 Cook St. Closed Mondays. Cash or cheque only.

Call 250-380-0324 for more information.

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