Going Gold for HIV

A look inside Life Ball, Europe’s biggest, grandest and most spectacular HIV/AIDS charity event

June 22, 2015 By Jennifer Morton

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Each year the city of Vienna hosts Life Ball, Europe’s biggest HIV/AIDS charity event. Now in its 23rd year, Life Ball creates public awareness for HIV/AIDS and raises funds to support HIV-related projects in Austria and around the world.

The theme of this year’s Life Ball, held on May 16, was inspired by the ancient Roman festival “Ver Sacrum,” or “Holy Spring.” Tens of thousands of spectators flocked to Vienna’s City Hall Square for the

gold-themed opening ceremony, which concluded with a fashion show by Jean Paul Gaultier and featured a music performance by 2014 Eurovision winner Conchita Wurst. Afterward, more than 3,000 guests decked out in golden finery and elaborate costumes danced the night away inside the various rooms and patios of City Hall.

Organizers pulled out all the stops for the lavish event, which was made possible by the generous support of Life Ball sponsors and partners, as well as thousands of volunteers. Celebrities such as Charlize Theron, Sean Penn, Paula Abdul, Roseanne, Mary J. Blige, Kelly Osbourne, Graham Norton and Dita Von Teese, plus a multitude of drag queens and burlesque performers, added their voices and talents to the cause.

But Life Ball is more than a single event. Founded in 1993 by Gery Keszler and organized each year by the nonprofit AIDS LIFE, Life Ball is a platform that brings together people from all walks of life and celebrates their diversity. Beyond the glitz and the glamour, Life Ball is about coming together to fight HIV/AIDS.

AIDS LIFE works closely with many international AIDS organizations. This year, the Red Ribbon Celebration Concert, held the night before Life Ball, supported the work of the Clinton Health Access Initiative. The AIDS Solidarity Gala, which took place at the Hofburg Palace prior to the opening ceremony, supported the work of UNAIDS. The First Ladies Luncheon, which is dedicated to ending the epidemic in women and girls, was held in cooperation with the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. Theron gave the keynote speech at the luncheon and talked about the work of the Charlize Theron Africa Outreach Project, which focuses on adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa.

In addition, each year the Life Ball Crystal of Hope Award is presented by Swarovski. This year, it was awarded to Lesotho-based charity Sentebale. The organization was founded by England's Prince Harry and Lesotho's Prince Seeiso. Sentebale's programs target vulnerable children in Lesotho living with and affected by HIV. (Click here to read more about the work of Sentebale.)

Keszler dedicated Life Ball 2015 to a friend who recently passed away from AIDS-related complications. As he visibly choked up at the Life Ball press conference, Keszler reminded reporters and media from around the globe that AIDS is not over.

Life Ball is more than just a grand party: It's a party with a purpose.

Model Ève Salvail (left) and her wife Sharon Ehrlich, at the Welcome Cocktail party at Le Méridien ViennaDerek Storm

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