Life Ball 2018

The annual fundraiser commemorates its 25th anniversary.

August 13, 2018 By Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr. and Cameron Gorman

In 2018, Life Ball—organized by LIFE+, an independent nonprofit organization based in Vienna—marked its 25th anniversary in the fight to end HIV/AIDS. Held every year at Vienna City Hall, the dazzling event took place on Saturday, June 2.

The glittering fundraiser has become one of the world's most important AIDS charity events. Celebrities from the worlds of fashion, entertainment and politics support Life Ball, and proceeds benefit global aid projects and their international partners. This year, for the first time, HIV groups in the United States will also receive funding.

A solo performance at the opening ceremony by Conchita as Maria von Trapp from The Sound of MusicCourtesy of Life Ball/Juergen Hammerschmid

The event raised over €1.3 million ($1.5 million) to fund HIV groups in Austria and around the world, according to an email to POZ from the Life Ball press office. Groups that received funds this year include amfAR, The Foundation for AIDS Research; the Charlize Theron African Outreach Project; Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS; The Elizabeth Taylor AIDS Foundation; Sentebale; the Dream for Africa Foundation; and various local Austrian HIV organizations.

This year's leitmotif (recurring theme) paid homage to the 1965 musical film The Sound of Music, which was shot on location in Vienna. According to LIFE+, the theme was chosen both to celebrate the grace of Austria and to allow for reflection on the notion that "security, health, acceptance and freedom are not obvious even in 2018."

Several related events took place in the days before and after the opening ceremony.

Oscar winner Charlize Theron received the Swarovski Crystal of Hope Award on Thursday, May 31, in Vienna. She accepted the award on behalf of her namesake organization, the Charlize Theron Africa Outreach Project, for its innovative work in the field. The project promotes HIV prevention among youth through self-empowerment.

The next day, Theron met participants of amfAR's Epic Ride to Life Ball for brunch in Salzburg. Led by amfAR CEO Kevin Frost, riders—including several other VIPs, actors and actresses, including Oscar winner Adrien Brody—began their four-day, 700-mile-plus HIV/AIDS awareness motorcycle tour on Wednesday, May 30, in Zurich and arrived in Vienna on June 2, in time to attend the opening ceremony.

One of the projects Life Ball supports is amfAR's TREAT Asia Pediatric HIV/AIDS Program, which focuses on improving the health and lives of children and adolescents living with HIV across the Asia-Pacific region. LIFE+ has provided more than $6 million over the years to this initiative.

The LIFE+ Celebration Concert, a sister event to Life Ball, features Austrian and international theater and opera stars; the concert also took place on June 1, at the Burgtheater in Vienna. "Home is where no one has ever been" was the theme of this year's concert, which explored through music and theater many creative and unexpected notions of "home."



Charlize Theron accepts the Swarovski Crystal of Hope from Gery Keszler (center) and Helene von Damm, former U.S. ambassador to AustriaCourtesy of Life Ball/Juergen Hammerschmid

The main event kicked off with the LIFE+ Solidarity Gala, which took place inside Vienna City Hall, hours before the opening ceremony. The gala banquet for exclusive guests featured a champagne reception, a live auction and music performances and was cohosted by The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria.

At the end of a 130-meter-long red carpet that included a style contest, the Life Ball opening ceremony showcased all sorts of theatrics inspired by The Sound of Music. Among the creative displays were a performance of “Do Re Mi” by a choir of boys and a rendition of “Lady Marmalade” by Patti Labelle accompanied by a choir of nuns.

The performances, including a dance by debutants outfitted in extravagant versions of traditional costumes, were interspersed with speeches and presentations delivered against a verdant background.

Among them was the presentation of a wedding-themed fashion show by 25 designers, including Jean Paul Gaultier, Kenzo La Collection Memento and Elie Saab, all of whom displayed their visions of “the most beautiful day in life.”

One of the major initiatives that LIFE+ champions throughout the year is its “Know Your Status” awareness campaign. Regan Hofmann, former POZ editor-in-chief and current policy officer at the U.S. liaison office of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) in Washington, DC,

spoke about the campaign.

“Know Your Status” promotes HIV testing through dramatic images of body-painted celebrities, including actor and model Aiden Brady, model Eva Herzigová and Paris Jackson, daughter of Michael Jackson.

The campaign supports the first part of the UNAIDS “90-90-90” objective—which aims to have 90 percent of people aware of their HIV status by 2020—by helping expand the number of testing sites in Austria.

During the opening ceremony, Jackson also represented her godmother’s namesake charity, The Elizabeth Taylor AIDS Foundation. She received the LIFE+ Award along with Joyce Jere, the Global AIDS Interfaith Alliance (GAIA) country director in Malawi, on behalf of the GAIA Elizabeth Taylor Mobile Clinics.

Olympic skier Gus Kenworthy also spoke at the opening ceremony in support of Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS.

After performances of “Edelweiss” (sung by 2014 Eurovision winner Conchita as bride Maria von Trapp) and “Climb Every Mountain,” the doors to Vienna City Hall were opened to all Life Ball attendees, and dancing and other activities rocked the neo-Gothic space.

Life Ball 2018 attendees dance the night away at Vienna City Hall.Courtesy of Life Ball/Maximilian Roeder

Performances by Beyoncé's professional dancers Shernita Anderson and Miles Keeney and musicians such as Betty Who further enlivened the dynamic atmosphere. Caitlyn Jenner, Kelly Osbourne and Drag Race veteran Nina Flowers were among the many other celebrities in attendance.

But the celebration didn't end there. A program for youth ages 16 and up, Life Ball Next Generation, was held on Sunday, June 3, at the same venue. The event included performances by Dutch musician Lady Bee and Austrian duo Wild Culture, among others.

"A global network has been created in over two decades," proclaimed a Life Ball press release, "with a common objective: To put an end to HIV and AIDS." Until then, Life Ball will continue to live up to this mission in all its colorful glory.

Check out the gallery below for Life Ball moments through the years.



Life Ball performers in 1994Twitter/@LifeBall_Official

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