

Neon-bright Party at the Pier tops list of 2012's best galas | TribLIVE

By [Kate Benz](#)

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1. Party at the Pier — Riverlife

Friday, Sept, 7

Chalk it up to a change in venue, the sellout crowd, or the fact that the socials not only let their hair down, they dyed it hot pink, but Riverlife managed to inject a serious dose of eye-popping attention into an otherwise casual weeknight during its Party at the Pier .

“It’s a ‘Neon and Nature’ theme, and I couldn’t go with nature, so ...,” explained Michael Hogue of his hot pink locks.

The applause-worthy move to the amphitheater at Rivers Casino allowed for the perfect amount of elbow room for the 675 in attendance. Throughout the evening, guests had the option of going on a jaunt down the river thanks to the Gateway Clipper, while others chose to perch around DJ Tommy D’s pulsating, but inexplicably lonely, dance floor. Shy as they might have been, there was no holding back when it came to embracing the “bold and brightest” dress code guidelines that resulted in color shocks galore, even for co-chairs Lucas and Renee Piatt .

“If they want bright, they get bright. I’ve got battery packs and everything!” said Renee of her fiber-optic shawl and hair accessories.

2. Wild Orchid Party — URBAN Polish

Friday, Aug. 17

The dull roar coming from the Strip District signaled the official start to what would turn out to be an event fantastically unbridled, thanks to more than 200 socials found

stomping at the Savoy. Tucked away on Penn Avenue, the urban hot spot held in its hand a coveted golden ticket that served as the siren call for good times and glamazons of all ages who were savoring URBAN polish's Wild Orchid Party.

"We thought, what better flower than the orchid, because it loses its flowers but, with patience and time, it can re-grow. They're delicate but really, really tough," said Alexis Wukich, who organized the event to benefit the Ladies Hospital Aid Society's Orchid Fund, providing assistance toward hair replacement for those dealing with various medical conditions.

Movement came in small doses thanks to a bevy of beautiful people packed three deep as the who's who kept the party going well into the evening.

3. Three Kings Day Gala — Pittsburgh Metropolitan Area Hispanic Chamber of Commerce

Friday, Jan. 6

In case you didn't feel the pulsating energy intoxicating the vast majority of guests at the Omni William Penn, consider yourself at an unfortunate loss.

Just half past 9 o'clock, and a very formal-feeling fete was about to get its switch flipped as more than 300 guests poured onto the dance floor, let their hair down, and brought the ballroom to its knees.

"The heels are sometimes too high. I'll fall over!" laughed Kourtney Diaz, managing to get a few moves in before waving the white flag.

A vibrating room courtesy of Noel Quintana's Latin Crew, salsa, merengue and cumbia dancing alone was enough to guarantee no one would be taking a seat anytime before midnight, as guests set the floor on fire. Celebrating the holiday season by marking the historical journey of the Three Wise Men traveling to Bethlehem bearing gold, frankincense and myrrh, the Chamber's inaugural gala benefited the PMAHCC Foundation Educational Fund.

4. The Rainbow Ball — JDRF (Formerly known as the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation)

Saturday, April 21

It was hard to tell which aspect could take the most credit for seeing to it that this black-tie blow-out brought every standard operating procedure down to its knees in favor of an unforgettable evening from start to finish.

Where to begin? Bonnie Walker of Bonnie Walker Events waved her creative wand across the ballroom of the Westin to transform the space into a jaw-dropping ambiance befitting JDRF's 20th anniversary. The banquet staff effortlessly catered to every whim of the 800 guests (a sellout) in attendance, passing through cocktail hour with trays full of champagne glasses that ensured no one was left wanting. And forget trying to choose a "best dressed" amongst this crowd of knockouts.

Before the evening was over, Gary Racan and the studio-e band rocked the shoes off of a dozen or so revelers who were barefooted on the dance floor in no time.

JDRF, formerly known as the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation, is the largest private funder of research for type 1 diabetes. The gala raised a staggering \$1.92 million.

5. Year of the Dragon Gala/Soiree — Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra

Saturday, Sept. 15

Adoring fans rushing the stage with bouquets of flowers, a standing "O" that lasted for minutes with shouts begging for more, groupies lingering excitedly post-performance ... you'd think there was a rock star in the house.

Turns out, there was: Maestro Manfred Honeck did the honors by welcoming internationally adored pianist Lang Lang to the stage for a performance that brought down the house.

"I promise you it will be a magical evening," vowed board prez Dick Simmons.

That proved to be the understatement of the year.

With the evening's energy lingering in the air, the socials then divided, as the adults stayed on for a dinner served by the Duquesne Club while the kids moseyed over to the Fairmont for an after-party Soiree that had everyone rocking well into the night.

From the record-shattering \$850K raised by the sold-out gala, to a full house filled with a fantastic number of young hipsters, the night was nothing short of spectacular.

6. Pointe in Time Ball: A Parisian Cabaret — [Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre](#)

Saturday, Nov. 10

Much could be said for the Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre's outstanding efforts to usher close to 400 guests into a new era of swoon-worthy black-tie balls.

Pointe in Time: A Parisian Cabaret left no one wanting as the ballroom of the Westin underwent a turn-of-the-century transformation, with costumed dancers and mixologist Steven Kowalczyk's absinthe bar paving the way for the Moulin Rouge tribute to take shape. What unfolded as the glitterati filtered into the space could be described as nothing less than a whiplash-inducing parade of pretty full-length gowns in every color of the rainbow.

Tables accented with moody candlelight and centerpieces of lush, scarlet-hued florals a la Hens and Chicks provided the perfect setting for guests to indulge in seven mouth-watering French courses that began with seared scallops and ended with gluttony. Adding to the evening, the PBT company dancers performed perfectly timed vignettes that were received with one standing "O" after another.

When it was all said and done, the evening raised more than \$449K, including auction proceeds of \$115K alone.

7. Mylan World TeamTennis Smash Hits — Benefiting the Pittsburgh AIDS Task Force

Tuesday, Oct. 16

The slams were flying fast and furious long before a single tennis ball hit the court as Sir Elton John and Billie Jean King took turns squaring off with teammates including Andy Roddick, Steffi Graf and Andre Agassi before the 20th annual Mylan World TeamTennis Smash Hits charity tourney at the [Petersen Events Center](#).

"I think the total age of my team is 618 ... and that's just between me and Martina Navratilova," John joked.

Glitterati who anteed up for the sold-out, \$500-a-pop VIP reception were packed six deep as they awaited the entrance of their favorite sports celebutantes, including co-captains Franco Harris (one of John's proclaimed idols) and eye candy Anna Kournikova,

who immediately scored the male demographic's vote for MVP.

Game time, and a crowd of nearly 5,000 watched all five sets that were played to raise awareness and a record-shattering \$1 million for the Elton John AIDS Foundation and the Pittsburgh AIDS Task Force.

8. An Alfresco Italian Dinner — Fern Hollow Nature Center

Friday, Aug. 24

Table for 90, anyone?

Those looking to spend an intimate evening encased by cramped quarters were nowhere to be found, as the Fern Hollow Nature Center provided a much-needed breath of fresh air during its Alfresco Italian Garden Dinner.

"We've been cooking for a few days, but it's been fun," confessed board prexy Marisa Tobias, who was amongst a handful of foodies who had been toiling away in the kitchen.

On the menu? A mouth-watering offering of fresh products from the St. James Farmers Market (all local, all donated) that produced zucchini fritters, bruschetta with Tuscan white beans, fresh pasta, meatballs in a roasted tomato sauce, grilled chicken with lemon and rosemary, green beans with olive and garlic and grilled eggplant with tomatoes, basil and cheese, and a tomato and cucumber salad and fresh green salad.

Tucked away on 33 acres in Sewickley, guests had no problem unwinding in the outdoor venue.

"We lit candles last year and served Limoncello ... no one wanted to leave," said FHNC's April Claus.

9. History Uncorked: Stars & Stripes: An American Story — Heinz History Center

Friday, Feb. 17

Nothing could stop 1,500 of the young and the restless from pouring in for this "Red, White and Blue Affair," where the increasingly loud din from the History Center's Great Hall signaled the arrival of the masses.

“It’s out of control,” mused chair Tracy Weigand.

Upping the ante, revelers took the theme as inspiration for some daring swan dives into previously unexplored fashion territory.

“It’s the only red, white, and blue thing I had!” laughed Joe King of his Evel Knievel ensemble.

As the multitudes began making their presence known via shorter-than-ever hemlines and a line of limos piling up outside, the migratory pattern immediately became evident as the sound of music began luring everyone up to the Mueller Center on the fifth floor, where the ballroom-cum-nightclub had been treated to a vivid transformation punctuated with bursts of illumination, visual eye candy that could be seen for blocks.

“I didn’t even know there were this many people in Pittsburgh,” laughed Ian Smith.

10. A Toast to the Untamed — Animal Rescue League’s Wildlife Rehabilitation Center

Thursday, Oct. 11

No black-ties, no rockin’ bands, no champagne toasts — but nonetheless, an evening worth noting, due in large part to the amazing dedication of the tireless staff and strong support system. Proving that good things can come in small packages, guests jumped at the chance to get up close and personal with animals of the less domestic variety, including a ball python who paints original works of art for sale.

The largest center this side of the state, the facility had treated 2,500 animals during the first 9½ months of 2012, with the help of volunteers whose 13,000 donated hours included round-the-clock care for quail, possum, owls, snakes, hawks, ducks, vultures, squirrels, wild rabbits and everything in between. Focused on rehabilitation, the center has a strong commitment to re-releasing animals back into the wild, although they provide much TLC to those in need of a permanent home.

“This really is the diamond of the shelter,” said Animal Rescue League executive director Dan Rossi.

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