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Couple raise funds to pay mom's medical bills

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November 15, 2009 **Section:** Local

CRYSTAL LAKE – It was the performance of their lives. After stints on Broadway in musicals such as “Titanic,” “Phantom of the Opera” and “Grease,” Robin Irwin and Erick Buckley hit the **Raue Center** for the Arts stage Saturday night, singing their hearts out to help someone dear to them.

Despite the fact that Irwin's mother, Judith Irwin, has been in the hospital since she fell last July, she helped plan the event that will help offset her mounting medical bills.

“She's still producing events laying in bed,” said Robin Irwin, getting ready in the dressing room before the show. “She said to keep it peppy.”

Belting out numbers from “Phantom,” “Les Miserables” and “Wicked,” the couple performed “Judy's choice of Broadway hits,” Buckley said. When Judith Irwin fell, she broke her left femur and her right shoulder, an accident that has kept her in the hospital since. Suffering from diabetes, the 65-year-old McHenry resident has a host of other health issues, including blindness, Robin Irwin said. She is at Holy Family Medical **Center** in Des Plaines, her fourth hospital since the accident.

With a lifetime of commitment to the community – having taught at Montini Catholic School in McHenry, doing public relations work for Centegra Medical **Center**, and volunteering every spare minute – it didn't take long to get enough volunteers to pull off Saturday night's event.

“My aunt said it best,” Robin Irwin said. “She said, ‘Judy plays Santa Claus all year long.’”

Judith Irwin also served on the board of the **Raue** and helped found the Judith Svalander Dance Studio, also creating window displays for the studio and other downtown businesses.

“She’s been involved culturally in the community for years,” Robin Irwin said.

Up until her fall, Judith Irwin’s health issues did not stop her from helping out other people, Robin Irwin said. When a co-worker was stricken with cancer, she started cooking for her.

“For Sara and her 90-year-old mother, she made dinner every Sunday,” Robin Irwin said.

The couple already had decided to come home to be with Judith Irwin and thought they should use their talents to help their mom with extraordinary medical bills.

“I needed to be here,” Robin Irwin said, adding that she passed off her work in New York to other people.

Being on stage together is nothing new to the couple.

“Robin and I actually met during the national tour of ‘Grease,’ ” Buckley said, adding that she also earned a master’s degree in directing and they both taught at New York University.

With other performances rounding out Saturday’s benefit, such as two dances performed by Judith Svalander dancers, the event was a reflection of how many people Judith Irwin has helped, event organizer Marla Gamze-Pendergrast said.

“She never ever wanted to be high-profile,” Gamze-Pendergrast said. “She just wanted to be behind the scenes.”

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