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Nonprofits seek to keep fundraisers attractive

by Kara Isham Arkansas Democrat-Gazette

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Rogers Adult Development Center

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ROGERS — With almost an entire month of winter left, Allison McElroy often finds herself thinking about leis, tiki torches, grass huts and tropical fare.

McElroy ponders these things for most of the year, because part of her job as director of the Adult Development Center Legacy Foundation is to organize the annual Spring Fling fundraiser. The weekend-long event — which includes a golf tournament, poker run and luau with silent and live auctions — is the major fundraiser for the Adult Development Center of Benton County, a nonprofit organization that provides job and skills training to adults with disabilities.

McElroy said the Spring Fling netted about \$60,000 last year and utilized the efforts of an estimated 45 volunteers. A committee started planning this year's May 18-19 event as early as January.

Officials in the nonprofit community agree that the number of fundraisers held in Northwest Arkansas has risen noticeably over the past few years. Most weekends throughout the year, opportunities exist to support at least one charitable organization through a social event. Many weekends, there are multiple fundraising events at different locations.

Some of the most common forms of fundraisers in the area are golf tournaments, galas and black-tie affairs, luncheons, receptions at private homes, and live and silent auctions.



The Rogers Little Theater cast members (from left) Josh Jones, Ramond Curtis, Michelle Helton, Justin Stewart, Caity Reidmueller and Drew Wisner perform during the Victory Gala on Jan. 27 at the Clarion Hotel and Conference Center in Bentonville. The annual event celebrates the theater's contributions to the performing arts in Northwest Arkansas.

DAN HALE / *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*

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With more fundraising events pulling at the public's attention, staff and volunteers for area nonprofits must look closely at every aspect of an event to ensure its success.

McElroy said her group relies on their long-time, dedicated supporters to continue Spring Fling's success, but she said talk has started among organizers about what could be done to keep the event fresh.

"You are always wanting an idea that helps you stand out from the rest, because there are so many fundraisers," she said.

McElroy said fundraisers are becoming more important because of continued cuts in state funding. Besides providing funds the center needs to operate, she said the event also gives the organization needed publicity.

"It would be a huge burden [financially] if we didn't have the fundraiser, but it also builds relationships with people who will continue to give in the future," she said.

She acknowledges that the Adult Development Center is lucky to have such a solid fundraiser that continues to draw supporters every year. The organization has changed silent-auction items and moved the luau indoors, but it has been lucky that the event has needed few other changes over the years to remain successful.

Standing out

Despite the potential for competition, McElroy believes there generally is a cooperative spirit among Northwest Arkansas' nonprofit community. As the president of the area chapter of the

Association of Fundraising Professionals, she has not seen much concern from members about the increasing number of events.

"It seems this area is so passionate about so many causes. There seems to be plenty to go around," she said.

Still, many small to mid-size nonprofits continue to ponder the ingredients of a unique, popular and successful fundraiser.

One is the Children's Safety Center in Springdale. The nonprofit allows children who have been abused physically or sexually to have a safe, comfortable place to meet with law enforcement, child protection and medical and mental health professionals.

For years, the organization has benefited from fundraising initiatives by local corporations, such as a Christmas train program organized by employees of J.B. Hunt Transport Services Inc. and a Christmas event where Santa flies in on a Lear jet organized by Wal-Mart Aviation and Beaver Lake Aviation. However, the Children's Safety Center had never tried its hand at an annual fundraiser of its own design until last year.

"We've really wanted to establish some type of signature event for a while, but it's about finding that niche that is different," said Brian Nollenberger, former development director for the center.

He said the group did not want to sponsor a gala or a ball but wanted to come up with an event that defined the organization. In 2006, the group organized Little Hands, Big Dreams, an event where money was raised through the sale of unique play structures.

However, after the group began planning the event, Nollenberger said it discovered another children-related nonprofit, Court Appointed Special Advocates of Northwest Arkansas, had a reception for a similar event called Project Playhouse planned on the same date.

Nollenberger said the center did not want to compete with another nonprofit, so the date of the fundraiser was changed, and volunteers looked into how to refocus the event.

Little Hands, Big Dreams was rescheduled a few months later as a more casual, family-focused event, rather than a one geared toward adults. The event and sale of the play structures raised nearly \$18,000.

Nollenberger said center volunteers and new development director Diane Talbot are evaluating Little Hands, Big Dreams to see what changes need to be made, if any, to further distinguish it from CASA's Project Playhouse.

SMALL GROUPS, BIG PROFITS

It is a matter of opinion among the public and the nonprofit community whether Northwest Arkansas has reached its capacity for large formal events, or whether it ever will.

Several organizations have proven that a black-tie gala can be profitable. In 2006, the St. Mary's Hospital Foundation's Charity Ball netted \$435,000. The Heart Gala raised more than \$265,000 for the area affiliate of the American Heart Association. The American Diabetes Association brought in about \$170,000 with its Kiss a Pig Gala.

However, many of the area's small charities, those not tied to a national organization, do not have the staff or the number of volunteers to do such large-scale events. Some don't really concern themselves with fundraising initiatives, including the Kendrick Fincher Memorial Foundation, which has a goal of preventing heat illness and promoting hydration during school sporting activities.

Executive Director Rhonda Fincher, whose son Kendrick died from complications of heat stroke in 1995, said the group has started discussing how it can help its annual youth run have more of a fundraising component.

However, she said she does not want to spend too much time or resources on fundraising. The organization is focusing on donations from individuals, companies and corporate sponsors. Without a development director, she believes organizing a major fundraiser takes too much time away from the organization's goals of educating the public.

There are smaller to mid-size nonprofit organizations that raise sizable amounts because they have fundraisers that set them apart in the public's eye.

Among these successful events is One Particular Harbor, the main fundraiser for The Ryan Gibson Foundation. The foundation distributes grants to cancer research physicians and institutions pursuing a cure for leukemia.

Board member Derek Gibson, brother of the foundation's namesake, said the fundraiser is organized primarily by family members and longtime friends and is designed to be a fun, casual evening. The event is held every year on the second weekend of July.

Ryan Gibson, who died of complications from leukemia in 2001, loved being on the water. So the nautical theme of One Particular Harbor was an easy decision. The event started with about 100 guests and in just a few years has grown to accommodate nearly 500 people. Last year's party netted more than \$100,000 for the organization.

Derek Gibson said most of the event's guests are invited supporters and friends of the organization, though the public is welcome.

"We do want to continue to grow, but at the same time, we don't want to get too big and lose the focus on our mission," he said. "We want people to enjoy coming and not feel obligated."

Pagnozzi Charities also has established a fundraiser with a distinct theme and stable support base. The Fayetteville group helps underprivileged children participate in sports leagues, clinics and camps.

The annual Pagnozzi Charities Sports Auction and Dinner accompanies a golf tournament that is in its 16th year. The tournament and auction will be Sept. 13-17 this year. Last year, the events raised more than \$150,000. The organization's director, Sarah Eldridge, said the auction is set apart from others in that it focuses strictly on sports memorabilia. The single focus allows the group to get the highest-quality auction items to draw sports fans.

"We don't worry too much about being a small organization," Eldridge said. "We are not just another gala. We are always sports geared, so people come to us because of that."

Eldridge said her organization would not survive without the auction fundraiser, which about 800 people attended last year. The group also has a smaller fundraiser at the home of founder Tom Pagnozzi, a former University of Arkansas and Major League baseball standout.

BIGGER isn't always better

Many local nonprofits have found fundraising success with more intimate events.

The Economic Opportunity Agency Children's House, a therapeutic child-care program that serves youths who have experienced emotional, physical or sexual abuse, will hold its fifth annual Summer Salsa fundraiser June 22 at Springdale Country Club.

The event was held in private homes the first three years but moved to the country club last year because of growth. But the party retains its intimate feel, said EOA Development Director Ben McLintock.

The event raised more than \$60,000 last year.

McLintock said organizers are seeking ways to keep the event fresh, but he wanted to focus on quality rather than expanding the event to an excessive size.

"We want to grow the event, but there will come a time when the event plateaus. I have no problem with that," he said. "The No. 1 selling point is telling the guests and supporters where their money and support is going.

"They are not just paying a fee for food and dances, they are supporting a charity, and their time and money does make a difference."

As a development director and a member of the Association of Fundraising Professionals, McLintock also attests to the importance of making an event stand out, especially with so many fundraisers being held annually.

McLintock said he sees a lot of the same supporters and sponsors being "tapped" for an event. He does believe that the area eventually will reach a saturation point, and it's been laid on the shoulders of the organizations to keep the events attractive so people will continue to attend.

"It's an interesting dynamic. There are so many great charities and people who are wanting and willing to support them," McLintock said. "The least we can do is come up with something that is unique and enjoyable so they want to come back the next year."

The Rogers Little Theater has no trouble making its annual Victory Gala different. Each year, the theater company changes the event's design, feel and entertainment. Often, it is designed around a show the theater group is either rehearsing or performing.

Ed McClure, secretary of the theater's board of directors, said the company approaches the event like it's a performance.

"Other organizations may not want to reinvent the wheel, but that is what we do every time we do a show, so it comes natural," McClure said.

The fifth annual Victory Gala, held Jan. 27 at the Clarion Hotel and Conference Center in Bentonville, took on the theme "Masquerade." The hotel was decorated to look like the masquerade ball scene from The Phantom of the Opera, and theater members performed numbers from the musical.

Besides being the largest gala held by the organization — about 300 people attended — this was also the first time the event was held in the winter. McClure said there was no site available for the first fall date chosen, so the group decided to push the soiree back by a few months because so many other big events were scheduled the same weekend.

"We are not going to go head-to-head with large charity balls," he said.

Organizers didn't want to worry about supporters and sponsors having to choose between events, he said. They also did not want to detract from other worthy causes in the area, including abuse, homelessness and poverty.

"Certainly, this is a base for people who love Rogers Little Theater and believe that culture is one of those intangibles in the community worthy of support," McClure said. "But we are not going to try to diminish or compete with other things in the community that are probably more urgent or graver than the culture aspect."

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