

Having
a

Ball

in the

Heartland

By MICHAEL MORAIN



Along with traditional balls and glitzy banquets, party planners cook up creative ways to raise funds for charity and appeal to younger donors.

Off came the hat. Then the suspenders. Then, amid giddy screams from women nearby, off came the shirt. Wearing only boots and the bulky pants from his uniform, the firefighter strutted up and down the bar's makeshift catwalk. He worked the crowd, pumping up bids in the annual Smoke and Fire Auction that raises money for a children's charity in Des Moines, Iowa's capital city.

The prize: a dinner date with him.

"A lot of the guys are apprehensive at first. They're shy," says Chris Fabela, one of the firefighters who put himself up for bid. He encouraged his buddies from the fire station to participate, too. "The thing that really sells them is that it's going for a good cause."

As always, there is no shortage of good causes. The tsunami in India, the earthquake in Pakistan and major hurricanes along the U.S. Gulf Coast pushed American philanthropy to its highest level in nearly a decade. In 2005, Americans gave more than \$260 billion to charity, according to a recent report by the Giving USA Foundation, a nonprofit research group (www.aafrc.org/gusa). The average American household annually donates about \$2,000.

Colossal disasters don't diminish the needs of local charities, however. Taxes in

A group of enthusiastic bidders at the auction.

the United States are considerably lower than in other Western countries, so many projects that provide social services—homeless shelters, children's programs, medical research labs—rely on generous financial support from private individuals.

With this ongoing competition for charitable donations, fundraisers are getting creative. Along with traditional banquets and glitzy balls, charities are organizing all kinds of events to attract wealthy donors—and appeal to a younger generation of philanthropists.

In a smaller city like Des Moines, home of about 200,000, the list of potential donors with deep pockets is relatively short. "The same people get the same invitations," says Melinda Toyne, owner of a party-planning business called In Any Event.

To get their attention, Toyne and other creative minds help nonprofit groups cook up new ways to party. It sounds like fun, but it's not always easy. "There's always a challenge," says Connie Schmett, who lives near Des Moines but spends much of her time in Washington, D.C., planning events for the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. Since President George W. Bush appointed her to the job six years



Photographs by ARTURO FERNANDEZ/dmjuice.com

ago, she has rubbed elbows with actors Robert Redford and Paul Newman, danced with hip-hop diva Beyoncé Knowles and gotten to know bad-boy rapper Kid Rock, whom she describes as “such a gentleman.”

Because many guests—including celebrities, dignitaries and donors—return year after year, Schmett says planners like her always ask themselves, “What are we going to do now?”

The answer comes in many forms:

- At a party to raise money for a zoo on Des Moines’ south side, organizers filled one of the outbuildings with fog to create an unusual atmosphere.
- At a fundraiser for the Des Moines Playhouse theater company before Halloween, guests arrived in elaborate costumes inspired by characters from famous movies and Broadway plays. There was Ursula from Disney’s *The Little Mermaid*, complete with bleached hair, purple skin and eight tentacles slithering from the bottom of her black velvet dress. One man came dressed as Johnny Depp’s title role from *Edward Scissorhands*, a man born with pruning shears instead of hands. There were superheroes, starlets and monsters—even a hefty, middle-aged man in a frilly pink ballet tutu.

As guests mingled inside a stately ballroom, they bid on lavish items in an auction:

prime tickets for basketball and hockey games, original artwork, cases of wine, certificates for a luxury spa, a trip to New York City and a convertible red Volkswagen Beetle.

The party included a gourmet banquet styled after the classic movie *Casablanca*, with a menu of mixed green salad with figs and pomegranates, Moroccan-spiced chicken and squash, and cake drenched in rum for dessert.

- A newspaper recently raised funds for a local charity by setting up a dunk tank in the lobby. During the lunch hour, employees paid a few bucks each for a chance to dunk their bosses in water.
- Golf tournaments are a particularly popular way to hit up donors for cash. At one fundraiser to help prevent blindness, golfers played at dusk with glow-in-the-dark balls. At another tournament for a museum, groups of four paid \$2,500 for a chance to compete. But no one seemed to care who won, because the course was filled with elaborate distractions—parties at each hole.

Along with providing a fun experience, it’s important to give donors something they can take home, says Toyne, who helped organize the museum’s golf tournament. Gifts can prompt guests to make donations long after an event finishes and remind them to return to the shindig the following year—

Above: Firefighter Kenny Wayne Larson drums up bids at the Smoke and Fire Auction that raises money for a children’s charity in Des Moines, Iowa.

and maybe bring along rich friends.

With that in mind, Toyne sent golfers home with extravagant gift baskets filled with bottles of wine, thick steaks of organic beef and deluxe grilling utensils.

In some cases, however, fancy gift baskets just don’t cut it. Donors can even be turned off by what they see as wasteful spending, and they may even choose not to return the following year. After all, there are plenty of other places to donate.

Sara Terry, a real estate broker and member of one of Iowa’s wealthiest families, says she and her parents get inundated with appeals from charities. “Do we get 10,000 invitations in the mail every year? Yes,” she says.

She goes to about a half dozen events throughout the year, but her parents, Bill and Susan Knapp, often attend two or three per month.

At a banquet for the Democratic Party of Iowa a few weeks before the November elections, the Knapps’ table was near the speaker’s podium. At one point in the evening, former President Bill Clinton took off his tie and spontaneously decided to auction it off to help raise campaign funds for the party. Susan Knapp placed the win-



Guests at the annual Hollywood Halloween costume party, a benefit for the Des Moines Playhouse theater company, dressed in costumes inspired by characters from Hollywood movies and Broadway plays. They bid on items including original artwork, a car and a trip to New York.

ning bid, shelling out well over \$1,000.

By all accounts, the banquet was a success. Some events, however, aren't so fun. "A lot of people don't know how to plan parties," Terry says.

Even some of the most lavish soirees fall flat because planners don't have a sense of taste in style, music or—worst of all—food. "My mom can taste the difference between dried parsley and fresh parsley a million miles away," says Terry.

She recalls a Valentine's Day party in 2005 that included a silent auction for things that nobody really wanted, including a cheap wooden box filled with a handful of plastic pens. "I went with money to give away, and that's the last thing I wanted," she says. "You

couldn't even give that stuff away."

The auction, Terry says, was just part of a long evening of disappointment. "I could have thrown a better party with my eyes closed, working with a bunch of 12-year-olds," she jokes.

To avoid repeating disasters, party planners and charity leaders usually meet a few days after a party, while details about the event are still fresh in people's memories. They huddle to review what worked, what didn't and to record what to do differently next year.

Sometimes, annual parties need major overhauls. At other times, guests look forward to particular traditions year after year.

Now in its fifth year, the firefighters'

auction seems to be a smash success, drawing more people than ever. This time, each bachelor pulled in hundreds of dollars, as stories started spreading through the raucous crowd.

Word got around, for example, that one of the firefighters had paid a friend to bid on him, as insurance against embarrassment. "He kind of got razzed a little," says Fabela, who was auctioned for \$150. The previous year, Fabela was won by a middle-aged woman who employed him to be a "cabana boy" at a pool party she hosted for her friends. Wearing a special hat, a pair of shorts and a tank top, he served them drinks and fanned them like royalty.


Another year, the wife of one of the bachelor's bosses called out the winning bid. But instead of going on a date, she had him baby-sit her kids so she and her husband could spend the night on the town.

And once, an auction date eventually led to marriage.

This year, Kenny Wayne Larson was up on stage for the first time. He was a little nervous, but says most of the people at the party were friends.

In the past, "I'd always made up an excuse to get out of it, but they finally talked me into it," he says.

Bidding on Larson climbed to \$100. Then \$150. Then up to \$200. Finally the auctioneer declared a winner.

Larson grinned. "I got lucky," he says. "My girlfriend bought me for \$250." 

Michael Morain is a reporter for The Des Moines Register, a newspaper in central Iowa.

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Recognizing Volunteers

Who are these ordinary Americans who keep getting photographed with President George W. Bush at the steps of Air Force One when he travels to their communities? Since March 2002, there have been more than 550 of them, called USA Freedom Corps Greeters. They are people like Honor Bell (left) who has established several volunteer programs in Pensacola, Florida, and is an active volunteer with the local school district. President Bush personally thanks them for their work when they greet him and he presents each with a President's Volunteer Service Award.

Charity Meter

American private giving outpaces U.S. government aid.

The U.S. private sector donates to international causes at a level nearly four times the amount spent by the U.S. government on official development assistance, according to a report by the Hudson Institute's Center for Global Prosperity.

Called the Index on Global Philanthropy, the report tallies \$71 billion in international donations by U.S. private charities, religious organizations, universities, corporations, foundations and immigrants sending money home for the year of 2004 (the latest year available).

That compares to \$20 billion in government foreign aid for the same year. The Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) ranks the United States as the biggest donor of government foreign aid among developed countries in terms of total dollars given. But, in another measurement, the

organization figures each country's aid as a percentage of its gross national income, which puts the United States second-to-last—with 0.17 percent of its gross national income given as foreign aid.

According to the Washington, D.C.-based Hudson Institute, "The tradition of private giving is considerably less developed in Europe than in the U.S." The think tank argues that Americans give abroad as they do at home—privately—and that the Europe-based OECD underestimates the impact of that assistance.

Close to half of all American adults do volunteer work, according to Independent Sector, a forum for charitable organizations. The index estimates volunteering for international projects totals 135,000 full-time work hours per year—worth more than \$4 billion. Web sites like www.volunteerabroad.com encourage the trend.

All told, U.S. private and voluntary organizations alone gave \$9.7 billion to developing countries in 2004, more than did the government of Japan, the index says.

"People in developing countries know these groups—American Red Cross, CARE, Catholic Relief, Rotary Clubs, Lions Clubs, YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association]—and their foreign counterpart organizations," says Carol C. Adelman, director of Hudson Institute's Center for Global Prosperity (<http://gpr.hudson.org/>).

According to the report, U.S. businesses gave \$4.9 billion in 2004. Adelman refers to "philanthrocapitalists"—who bring "business techniques, accountability, transparency and results to remote villages in need."



The Salvation Army's Olga Nunes watches Edward Pestrollo put a donation into the kettle outside a store in San Jose, California.

American universities and colleges gave more to developing countries in foreign scholarships (\$1.7 billion) than Australia, Belgium, Ireland and Switzerland each gave in official development assistance in 2004, the report says.

The index reports that foundations donated \$3.4 billion in 2004. The Foundation Center, a philanthropy-research organization, reported a 100 percent increase in international giving

by foundations from 1998 to 2002.

The index includes tabulations of donations by other private sectors in 2004, including religious organizations (\$4.5 billion) and remittances by individual immigrants to their home villages (\$47 billion).

The report's authors said this is the first of what will become an annual survey that will eventually include data on international, private giving from Europe and other parts of the world.

From USINFO, a product of the Bureau of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State.

The USA Freedom Corps,

operating from the White House, coordinates national service programs that provide opportunities for Americans to serve their country by sharing their time and talents with others. The programs include AmeriCorps, Citizen Corps, Peace Corps, Learn & Serve America and the Corporation for National and Community Service.



http://www.usafreedomcorps.gov/about_usafc/programs/index.asp

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DONATIONS