



John Graham, Carol Pier, Elle Young and Joe Osment. **photos** Bob Holmes (2)

DREAM THEMES

NONPROFITS CAPTIVATE ATTENDEES WITH UNIQUE, CREATIVE EVENTS

by John Osborne



Kim Chappell and Treacy Raskin.

DUCK DOWN INTO THE RABBIT HOLE WITH ALICE IN WONDERLAND TO see what hand of cards the Queen of Hearts deals you.

Link arms with Dorothy and friends while skipping joyfully along the Yellow Brick Road and singing at the top of your lungs.

Or go deep-sea diving and help to find that always elusive Nemo.

All of these fantastical possibilities (and many more) come to life during the annual Storybook Ball hosted by Ronald McDonald House Charities of Southwest Florida, but the nonprofit organization represented by the famously good-natured clown isn't the only area charity getting creative with its fundraising efforts these days.

Fancy a quick trip to 1920s Paris without the time machine or annoying transatlantic flight? The David Lawrence Center & Foundation's Under the Eiffel Tower gala in January would've stamped your passport with an unforgettable night's worth of cosmopolitan fun.



View of the Magic Under the Mangroves tent as seen from the Shotwell Wavering Filter Marsh at the Conservancy of Southwest Florida Nature Center.
photo Mark Block



David Blowers, Northern Trust Bank president of east Florida wealth management; Lynn Slabaugh, Conservancy board chair; Stephanie Goforth, Northern Trust Bank president of the west Florida region; and Robert Moher, Conservancy president and CEO at "Magic Under the Mangroves."
photo Mark Block



Kevin Buckler, president and CEO of The Racer's Group, and 2014 Chair of Magic Under the Mangroves Lynne Shotwell with her husband, Chip.
photo Mark Block



Christopher and Jeannie Smith get some good news about their bid on a live-auction item.
photo Mark Block

"We're so lucky and fortunate to have such an affluent community, and as we all move to the next level age-wise, I think it's natural to look back and see how you can give back to the community. We have a great canvas here, just waiting for us to create something on it."

CARYN BEUCHEL



Matty Jollie entertains guests before dinner begins at Magic Under the Mangroves. **photo** Mark Block

Windows Catering provided scrumptious hors d'oeuvres during the Conservancy of Southwest Florida's 10th annual "Magic Under the Mangroves" gala dinner and auction fundraiser
photo John M. Wissocki



So too would have the Conservancy of Southwest Florida's Magic Under the Mangroves event, the Rotary Club of Naples' Grapes and Apes fundraiser at the Naples Zoo and Hope for Haiti's "Passport to the Stars" gala, all held last month.

And if you're hungry for a good time in the future while contributing to a good cause (no time machine required unless you're really impatient), you might want to sink your teeth into the inaugural BaconFest coming up Nov. 7. Kiwanis Club of Pelican Bay recently announced its plans to host the event which will benefit its programs as well as the Hodges University scholarship fund.

Ronald McDonald House's Storybook Ball, held in February raised a record-breaking \$150,000 for its programs. "The whole idea behind the Storybook Ball is the storybook theme," said Laura Ragain, executive director of Ronald McDonald House Charities of Southwest Florida. "A lot of it is how you decorate the room. This year, with 'The Lion King' theme, we had a space for the silent auction that represented the Serengeti and stuffed animals from The Shell Factory — a lion, a zebra, a giraffe — to go along with the jungle theme."

At this year's Parisian-themed gala benefiting David Lawrence Center, Caryn Beuchel, a retired psychotherapist and board member, served as co-chair with Amanda Jaron at the event which raised around \$450,000. Beuchel said that selecting a theme for the center's fundraisers (next year's theme will be "Ancient Greece: An Evening by the Parthenon") isn't as difficult as one might think.

"Actually, because the people who chair the committees and the people who are interested in being helpful with the galas are all very well-traveled, we pick a destination that someone's been to and loved and wanted to bring that atmosphere and feeling back with them," she said. "We try to create something different each year that makes (donors) feel special and cared for in the hopes that they will reach into their hearts and souls to make someone else feel special and cared for."

Stephanie Jepsen is the director of development for Hope for Haiti, which raised more than \$1.7 million for its vision of bringing sustainable communities to the impoverished island nation with this year's Passport to the Stars event. The gala featured volunteer paparazzi and a photo booth to go along with a silent auction filled with star-studded packages and a celestial ballroom.

"Our gala has become known as the 'fun' gala of Naples, and we take great pride in that. We make sure that the theme, venue, food, entertainment, décor and overall guest experience will be a fun one and that (guests) will come back year after year," Jepsen said.



This year's Ronald McDonald House Storybook Ball held on Feb. 8 had a "Lion King" theme.

Rich Ahrens, president-elect of the Rotary Club of Naples, said that it's vital to stand out from the crowd while trying to raise money — especially in this town.

"We've been holding our events at the Naples Zoo for the last (four) years," said Ahrens, estimating that his organization has raised more than \$750,000 during that time. "There are a million galas in Naples each year, and hundreds of nonprofits and with everyone trying to raise money at the same time, the best thing to do is to try to find an unusual angle."

Joe Frazier, the director of security at Hodges University who works closely with the Kiwanis Club of Pelican Bay, said BaconFest will also aim to accomplish that mission.

"Bacon is really taking off," said Frazier, who hopes to attract more than 3,000 bacon-lovers to the November fundraiser. "There are bacon alarm clocks that sizzle to wake you up and give off the smell of bacon and bacon bowls that you can put whatever other foods you want into. Bacon is an anomaly that's really catching on."

Frazier said that the Kiwanis Club of Pelican Bay decided on the bacon theme after carefully studying similar fundraising efforts around the country.

"They did a lot of research on (bacon-themed fundraisers) across the nation and (the fundraisers) were all extremely successful in other places," Frazier said. "I don't know about other people, but bacon is one of my favorite foods, and I think it

will be a good attraction for people, a good draw."

Jepsen said that she believes Hope for Haiti's fundraising themes draw people who might otherwise not attend.

"Our 'Passport to...' themes have been varied over the years, and we have quite the following," she said, noting that gala co-chairs Jo O'Reilly, Pat Holmes and Mary Lottes dreamed up this year's theme. "Our hope is that people who might not know about Hope for Haiti or our mission will be drawn to take up their passport, so to speak, and join us on a journey of a lifetime."

Ahrens said that a loyal group of supporters is likely to show up for a particular organization's fundraisers regardless of the theme.



Jarret Ditch, Burn Baby Burn Productions with Magic Under the Mangroves Fund the Future performers. **photo** Mark Block



Magic Under the Mangroves past and present chairs: Maureen Lerner, Jeannie Smith, Lynne Shotwell, Nancy White and Susan Dalton. **photo** Mark Block



Far left: Colin Terrence and alligator With Robin and Phillip Calabrese. **photo** Bob Holmes

A Port Royal Jewelers associate with Owner William Boyajian and Steven Leonard. **photo** Mark Block

As a self-proclaimed organizer who loves to cook, Beuchel said that she and co-chair, Jaron, shouldered the majority of the planning for the David Lawrence Center's "Under the Eiffel Tower" gala this year.

"I think we made a fabulous and interesting pair because Amanda's a jeweler and designer and her creative flair was evident in the look and atmosphere of the gala," she said. "We naturally had different responsibilities. All of the table décor was handmade by volunteers, and right at the end we brought in a florist to help fill out the tables. Some years we use party planners and some years we don't. It changes depending on who's leading the event."

Beuchel thinks that Southwest Florida makes for a prime location for hosting fundraisers.

"It's absolutely wonderful here," she said. "We have a gorgeous and really beautiful and affluent community; we truly live in paradise. We're so lucky and fortunate to have such an affluent community, and as we all move to the next level age-wise, I think it's natural to look back and see how you can give back to the community. We have a great canvas here, just waiting for us to create something on it."

In the end, Frazier said that fundraising ultimately boils down to the beneficiaries of each organization's events.

"The focus of the Kiwanis Club is changing the world for children," he said. "With that in mind, we hope that people will show up at BaconFest with smiles on their faces and dollars in their hands. Anything for the children of the world is a great cause, so we hope that people will open their hearts and their pocketbooks to make the world a better place for them."

Jepsen concurred.

"Our gala is a great opportunity to bring the community together in celebration of our work in sustainable communities (in Haiti) and to raise much-needed funds for our programs," she said. "It is our largest fundraiser of the year and it's a great way to bring a taste of Haiti to Naples. We always try to give guests the opportunity to support us in different ways — silent and live auctions, raffles, and the 'Fund a Need' (portion of the gala), which allows people to make an outright gift from the floor. It's always exciting to see those paddles go up."



Jenny and Tate Hair at Under the Eiffel Tower gala. **photo** Lane Wilkinson