

Evanston Community Foundation holds annual fundraiser for community grants

The Evanston Community Foundation held its annual benefit Sunday evening to raise money to fund the organization's community grants.

"The event builds community to have the people who support the foundation together," said Sara Schastok, ECF's president and CEO. "It makes for a very nice party of people who really care and are dedicated and appreciative of what Evanston residents can do together."

More than 300 community members attended the Celebrate!Evanston benefit at the Michigan Shores Club, 911 Michigan Ave., in Wilmette. The event, titled the "Bounty of Evanston," was moved to a larger venue this year after last year's fundraiser at the Levy Senior Center, 300 Dodge Ave., reached its capacity. Tickets were sold for \$150, and additional money was raised through donations.

The foundation supports groups that are primarily based in Evanston and serve its residents in a significant way, Schastok said. ECF aims to help community organizations grow in new initiatives.

"We like to give grants that support partnership," Celebrate!Evanston co-chair Lisa Altenbernd said.

NBC5 reporter Christian Farr and ECF board member Kevin Mott emceed the evening.

During the event, attendees participated in a cake contest in which they voted for their favorite desserts prepared by Evanston bakeries and restaurants. They also watched a live performance and stage parody, "The Wizard of EvanstOz." The performance included cameo appearances from State Rep. Robyn Gabel (D-Evanston) and other leading Evanston residents.

Following a three-course dinner, prizes were auctioned off, including a San Francisco getaway and a suite for 12 at a Chicago Blackhawks game. ECF leaders spoke about their goals for the foundation to raise additional money.

Celebrate!Evanston co-chair Mary Finnegan said the funds help the foundation provide grants to different community groups.

"The grants help make Evanston a stronger community," she said. "They help make Evanston thrive."

ECF has been Dance Marathon's secondary beneficiary for 17 years and received more than \$103,000 last year. Twenty members of the committee's executive board volunteered at the event, assisting in selling bracelets and other activities.

Finnegan said this year's benefit was the biggest year for sponsorship and attendees. ECF's largest benefactors include Madison Dearborn Partners LLC, Hagerty Consulting Inc. and IRMCO.

Schastok said Evanston is at a disadvantage, being located just outside of Chicago, the philanthropic capital of Illinois. Although poverty has been increasing in the suburbs, fundraising has not.

"No one else is going to do it for us," she said. "We like to say yes."

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