

Wine, Women & Shoes: Let's Party for a Cause!

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Emily Stroud & Emily Tack, co-chairs of Sarasota's seventh WWS, which raises money for parental education.

A national fundraising organization has discovered a way to make a difference by tapping into two of woman's great loves: wine and shoes.

Founded in 2004 by Elaine Honig, Wine, Women and Shoes (WWS) is a unique organization that brings together local charities, independent retailers, footwear designers and the women that love them, all for one night of shopping, bonding and fund-raising. The hosting charity raises money in several ways: ticket sales, sponsorships, auction lots and retailers' shoe sales (a portion of which goes back to the charity).

The actual event is a high-end, fashion-focused evening that combines raising money for a good cause with glamor and fun. It's also a combination that charities, retailers and shoppers are increasingly responding to favorably. In its first year, only three charities signed on to work with WWS. This year, there will be 28. WWS has produced more than 100 events and raised more than \$11 million for participating charities.

Honig attributes the event's success to what she calls "the girlfriend focus."

"A big part of it is celebrating the girlfriend energy. We really are about coming together for a greater cause, and then also celebrating each other," she explains. "People want to be a part of that energy."

Designer Diana Kelly with 50 "Solemen" (who proudly call themselves "shoe guys") at Wine, Women & Shoes Sarasota. (To see Kelly's shoe line, go to www.dianakelly.com.)

A Fun Pairing

Honig says the idea came to her through her work in the wine industry. She thought wine and shoes would be a fun pairing, and an interesting break from the usual wine-and-food parties.

Charities that are interested in hosting a WWS event license the party-planning blueprints from WWS. WWS also provides consulting and coaching. The organization has national partners that are available to assist the local charity. Everything the participating organization earns, it keeps.

To supply the shoes that make these events unique, WWS looks to independent footwear retailers in the community. On average, WWS events partner with eight retailers who sell twenty styles of shoes and accessories. Twenty percent (20%) of those sales go to the hosting charity.

"The women who attend these events want to buy shoes, and they want to go home with shoes in their bag," Honig says.

Dapper Men Serve Shoes

To create an atmosphere of class and refinement, most high-end fund-raising events feature waiters serving guests fancy hors d'oeuvres on silver platters. WWS nights feature a similar concept, but instead of finger foods and cheeses, dapper men serve what women really want: shoes.

"Shoe guys" are local volunteers who walk the event carrying trays of shoes and charming the guests with their good looks and newly acquired shoe knowledge. Shoe guys are trained in shoe vocabulary and shoe-making techniques so they are better prepared to educate and amuse the women in attendance.

"Nothing is more silly than seeing a guy come up and say, 'Don't you just love this kitten heel?'" Honig says.

Sometimes shoe guys are the husbands or boyfriends of women within the charity. Others are volunteers them-



selves. WWS organizers have been known to enlist the entire male staff of dentists' and doctors' offices to work the crowd at their events. The employees of participating shoe retailers are also commonly recruits. Shoe guys have to be outgoing guys with a sense of humor, and not afraid to be surrounded by lots of women dressed to the nines and ready to buy.

Two-Way Love Affair

Molly Jackson, a long-time WWS retailer who is also a member of NSRA's Board of Directors, says it's a two-way love affair between shoe guys and guests. Male volunteers get a kick out of being fussed and fawned over by female attendees. "They eat it up," she says with a laugh. In fact, her business partner and husband David has participated as a "soleman" in past events, and "had a blast," Jackson says.

Jackson got involved with WWS six years ago, when Forty Carrots, a local nonprofit that provides pre-school and parenting classes to community members, decided to host an event. At the time, Jackson participated as a sponsor because her original Sarasota, Florida New Balance store did not stock the fashion-focused footwear appropriate for the event. Last year, after she opened her new store, Molly's Boutique, Jackson started working with the event as a fashion retailer.

Return on Investment

The Sarasota event generally features about 12-15 vendors and attracts 550 guests. Jackson says it is a well-managed and well-planned event that generates a lot of buzz in the community. Guests receive goodie bags for which each retailer supplies an item. This year, Jackson donated Molly's Boutique gift cards, which provided a huge return on investment.

"That has proven to be more successful than the actual day's sales," she says.

For retailers who are interested in becoming a larger part of their local



Attendees have their photos taken with friends. More than 500 women attended Sarasota's seventh annual WWS, which raised more than \$200,000 for Forty Carrots Family Center.

charity's event, Jackson suggests hosting pre- and post-event sales. Women don't just want to shop for shoes at the event, she says, pointing out that they want to **wear** great shoes to the fundraiser as well.



Dr. Neal Pollack served as a volunteer "Soleman," showing ladies the latest trends from participating vendors.

"Even though there's a lot of shopping going on during Wine, Women and Shoes, we certainly have seen more customers after the fact in-store," Jackson adds. She sees the event as a business builder as well as a give-back to her community.

Jackson also recommends that retailers do research on the event and charity before hand, to be sure that the organization is up to their standards. "For sure do it, if [you] feel strongly about the organization that's putting it on," she advises.

Honig says WWS's goal for the future is to keep growing. She plans to increase their numbers to 40 in 2013, and 50 in 2014.

"We're there to create a win-win for everybody involved," she says. "I base our success on everybody being happy." ■

Editor's Note: Retailers who have identified a local charity that they want to help should urge that charity to contact Wine, Women & Shoes by phone at 707-479-2055, or online at winewomenandshoes.com to get details on cost for a party-planning blueprint.