



MARISA LANE

A NEW BLEND

WINEMAKERS KNOW THE ADVANTAGES OF BLENDING DIFFERENT WINES TO CREATE THE DESIRED FINISH. THE NAPLES CHILDREN & EDUCATION FOUNDATION, FOUNDER OF THE NAPLES WINTER WINE FESTIVAL, ALSO KNOWS THE BENEFITS OF THE RIGHT BLEND OF SUPPORT.

BY KATHY BECKER

The Naples Winter Wine Festival started with a conversation among friends about how to take a small wine event and make it more profitable for charity. That conversation quickly became an organization that now serves as the model for wine festivals and fundraising around the country.

The secret to the success—in 11 years, the festival has poured \$94.5 million into area children’s charities—is the foundation’s organizational structure, which ensures that those who support its efforts are thoroughly committed.

A small paid staff and volunteer trustees from the community run the Naples Children & Education Foundation (NCEF), which puts on the Naples Winter Wine Festival, as well as administers the funds raised by it.

“The idea is that it’s just a lot more than writing a check,” says NCEF Chairman of the Board Bob Scott. “Trustees are actively involved in putting on dinners. Nine of the trustees are on the grant committee, with ongoing liaising with different charities. The board meets frequently with sub-functions, including public relations, and some of the administrative aspects. There is a lot to do. Our staff is small for the reach



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and complexity of what we do. We rely on the trustees to do the heavy lifting.”

Eighteen couples began discussing how to create a world-class wine festival in 2000, and quickly became doers, inviting more than 30 chefs and vintners to stage the first festival in 2001.

As the festival grew, additional doers were added occasionally to the founding group during the first 10 years. As the festival settles in to its second decade, a new trustee category has been created, Emeritus Trustee, to allow founders to take a step back and new trustees to be added. “Originally it was a much smaller group,” says Scott, who became a trustee with his wife, Karen, in 2006 after moving to Naples full-time from New York, where they were active in a number of charities. “As it grew, we needed more trustees. We need to be the size we are now.”

Currently, 69 trustees serve the organi-

zation, with 11 emeritus trustees. “Trustees who served actively for 10 years began to run out of gas, especially when you consider how active they have to be,” Scott says. “Some of the trustees like to downshift a little, and they’ve earned it.”

At the same time, adding new trustees to the blend brings new ideas and resources. “To keep the Wine Festival successful, we need to keep it fresh,” Scott says. “Each year the new co-chairmen put their own spin. We don’t totally reinvent each year; we season with new spices. From the new trustees, we get freshness, a new set of eyes, energy. We get involvement in different geographic parts of the community. It’s important.”

CULTURE

Keeping the culture of the organization intact even as it changes is critical. New trustees are suggested by existing trustees,



Far left: Trustees Monte Ahuja (bidding) and Usha Ahuja (center) at the 2011 Naples Winter Wine Festival. Left: Vintner and auctioneer Ann Colgin has been involved with the festival since the beginning and has earned the title of Honorary Trustee.



Wines from some of the best vineyards in the world are represented at the festival. BOB UNGER

and then approved by the board once the candidates understand what is expected and agree to be involved.

“It’s a close-knit organization,” Scott says. “You are in the foxhole with a compatible group of people. It’s not one of those organizations where your name is on the letterhead and you never go to a meeting. The trustees are the best filters for finding new trustees. Given the financial and time commitment involved, it would be difficult to not enjoy the company of fellow trustees.”

For their part, the trustees are expected to provide direct financial support for five years as well as sponsor or cosponsor wine dinners frequently in their homes. In addition, trustees are called upon to use their resources to contribute auction lots and invite potential bidders.

These expectations are part of what drew some of the new trustees to the

organization. Dave Gibbons, a new trustee with his wife, Pat, in 2010, says he bought a home in Mediterra in 2007 after selling his business, and heard about the festival. He was unable to attend in 2008 because the event was sold out, but went the next year. “I was retired and was actively paying attention and looking at charitable efforts to invest time and money on good initiatives,” he says. “It didn’t hurt that Pat and I love wine. We were very impressed with the approach taken by NCEF. Not just money, but time, energy and effort making sure the money is well spent and getting the biggest bang for the buck.”

After living and working in Naples for 30 years, Sandi and Tom Moran already knew many of the charities supported by the foundation, some of them from their inception. “We’ve been in town, involved with these charities almost since the beginning,” Tom says. “We’ve raised kids

here and been here more than 30 years. Naples has been very good to us. It’s our responsibility to give back.”

With their children grown, the Morans decided they wanted to increase their charitable participation and became trustees in 2010. “The biggest thing for us was the Meet the Kids Day,” Sandi says of one of the activities of the festival, where participants get to see how the money raised at the festival is being used by the nonprofit organizations by meeting beneficiaries. “We already knew a lot of the trustees. It was eye-opening to see what an impact the NCEF is making in Collier,” Sandi says.

Monte Ahuja also was looking to put down roots in the community as he and his wife, Usha, transitioned to spending more time in Naples. They were invited to the festival by trustees Jim and Linda Malone four years ago and jumped in to support by



Trustees Don and Angela Smith, left, with vintners Barbara and John Shafer



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actively bidding, purchasing a Bentley for \$1.2 million. In 2010 they became trustees and hosted their first wine dinner. "We are extremely involved in northern Cleveland," Ahuja says. "We will be spending more time in Naples than before, and we have the same desire to be involved in the community."

New trustees Don and Angela Smith are already involved in the community as creators of Angelina's Ristorante and Agave Southwestern Grill. "This may sound a little corny, but we love this area," Don says. "I've never seen an assemblage of people committed to do something like the Naples Winter Wine Festival."

TOAST OF THE TOWN

Many say the festival is a success because it is fun. Enjoying fine wine and food is definitely part of the equation, and something that the trustees have in common.

"It is social," Scott says. "We enjoy a bottle of wine at the trustee meetings, and it's part of the culture. We celebrate the skills of the best chefs. The social element is important."

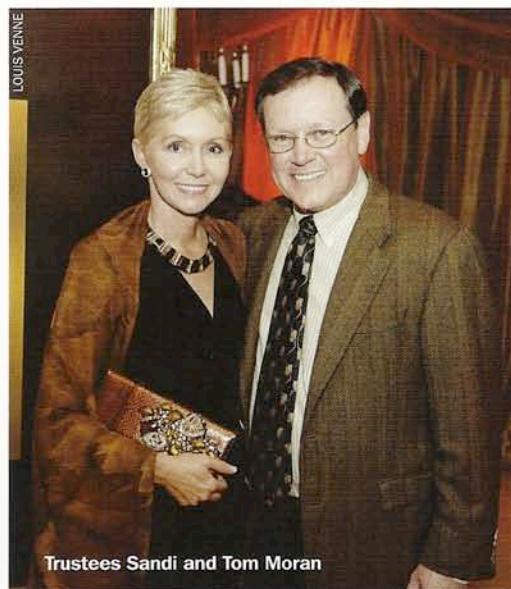
For Sandi Moran, the fine food and wine component was definitely a plus. As Bailli for the Bailliage de Naples of the Chaîne des Rôtisseurs, she knows a thing or two about staging large dinner parties. This year, she served on the festival's chef committee, traveling to recruit culinary talent.

"We've made a lot of new friends," she says. "The nice thing about being a trustee

is it's like being part of an extended family. We've traveled with some of them. It's definitely rewarding."

The Gibbons attended their first Naples Winter Wine Festival without knowing any of the trustees, but feel the social aspect is a bonus to the charitable impact.

"Some of the magic is how these people work together," Dave Gibbons says. "We've made a lot of terrific friends since we started with the Wine Festival. There's a lot of enjoyment in meeting people with similar interests. People who love wine are good at sharing. I can't say enough about how terrific I think the results of this effort are. The fact that we have so much fun doing it is great." ♦



Trustees Sandi and Tom Moran



Trustees Don and Pat Gibbons, left, with Jeannelle and Brian Brady and Cheryl Pifer

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