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Michelle Williams (right) talks with Whitney Miller at an annual Junior League picnic and awards night. Williams, who was diagnosed with leukemia, was the recipient of blood and platelets donated by members of the Junior League.

21st Century league

Group sheds stereotype, ramps up activities, fund-raising

By David Flaum
June 3, 2005

A six-figure budget, 2,000 members and a headquarters housing everything from a business incubator to wedding receptions -- that's the 21st Century Junior League of Memphis.

Young executive wives sipping tea and doing a little volunteer work -- the Junior League stereotype -- went the way of nylons, rotary telephones and vinyl record albums.

"The perception in the community is that we're a group of women volunteers, which we are," said Kim MacQueen, 2004-05 president.

But 70 percent of members have jobs and "on a day-to-day basis, we're a business," MacQueen said.

That includes training, special-event rentals, providing temporary office space for fledgling nonprofits and pumped-up fund-raising.

All of it revolves around the Community Resource Center, a building on the National Historic Registry the league bought in 1991 and renovated.

"It's our link to the community," MacQueen said.

The league has a five-year-old free leadership

training program, open to anyone, but aimed mainly at nonprofits. Representatives of 34 of them are in this year's class, MacQueen said.

Wedding receptions, special events and other gatherings not only bring in people but also raise revenue -- about \$50,000 a year to help offset \$80,000 in operating expenses for the building.

The Junior League has always been heavy on voluntarism -- active members must put in at least 40 hours a year either within or outside the organization.

The league ramped up fund-raising over the years to support itself and put money into programs around Memphis.

"With the changes we've seen in the nation with charitable fund-raising, many organizations are putting an intensified focus on their activity," said Dave Skorupa, spokesman for United Way of the Mid-South. "People are still giving, but there's a lot more competition than there used to be over the past 10 years."

To cope with those challenges, the Junior League uses a three-year cycle called earn-budget-spend.

"Many nonprofits live from hand to mouth," said treasurer Mary Trotz.

By making the money in year one, budgeting for operations and community projects in the second year and using the funds in the third year, she said, "We always have in hand what we need to run the organization and make our community grants."

The centerpiece is the Crystal Ball once every three years.

Sponsors kicked in \$670,000 of the \$800,000 collected and the league raised enough through the silent auction to pay expenses, MacQueen said.

Doing that once every three years "means we won't have to ask our sponsors for money every year," she said. "That's attractive to them . . . and they can pay in installments."

The league has other annual fund-raisers: Merry Marketplace, an October crafts sale, and a beer tasting with Fresh Market that raised \$9,000 in two hours. The group also sells cookbooks and runs a thrift store, Repeat Boutique, on Summer Avenue.

Of the money raised, \$430,000 will go into operations -- salaries, security, technology, grounds.

The league funnels another \$170,000 a year into about 15 community projects.

That will include the first \$20,000 of a five-year, \$100,000 grant announced last week for Hope House, a program for children of HIV/AIDS infected parents and their families.

Such grants come with womanpower giving members more than 650 volunteer opportunities, MacQueen said.

That multiplies the value of the grants about fourfold, said Laurie McIntosh, president of the Memphis chapter of the Association for Fundraising Professionals.

Combining cash and volunteers is a unique approach to giving and, especially, the time commitment is getting harder to find these days, she said.

The league contributes \$15,000 to Baptist Trinity Care & Hospice Camp Good Grief, a free three-day camp at Pinecrest Conference Retreat for 40 children grieving from the loss of a family member.

That covers the per-camper cost of \$1,000 for 15 of the 7- to 12-year-olds, said Angela Hamblen, program director.

About 15 league members handle pre-camp work such as preparing activities and packing survival kits. Others attend camp as buddies or helpers.

"They don't just come to this program to fill hours, they put their hearts and souls into it," Hamblen said.

The league started small with Memphis PREP, but is adding a \$10,000 grant and committing 12 volunteers to the program that sends rising high school juniors and seniors to summer programs at prep schools.

League members will work with students when they return to prepare for ACT and SAT tests and on community service projects, said Carol Barnett, project coordinator for the Memphis Rotary Foundation, which runs the program.

And they will sponsor or conduct workshops on time management, resumes and essay writing, tasks the foundation had to hire people to do.

"It's a wonderful partnership that ought to be very rewarding for everyone," Barnett said.

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JUNIOR LEAGUE OF MEMPHIS

Top person: Courtney Murrah, president

Address: 3475 Central

Members: 600 active, 150 provisional, 1,250 sustaining

Membership: Women 23 years old or more.

Employees: 3 full time, 1 part time

Phone: 452-2151

Web: jlmemphis.org

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