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VOL. 29 NO. 2

www.seabreezepublications.com

FEBRUARY 2021

SOUTHERN PROFILE

Wounded Veterans Relief Fund Telethon Meets Goal To Support Disabled Veterans

By Chrystal D. Rambarath

The COVID-19 pandemic brought our world to a standstill, forcing businesses, small and large, to slow or shut down completely. But while many industries dwindled, the nonprofit organizations that provide basic needs and serve society's most vulnerable experienced exponential demand. One local nonprofit, Wounded Veterans Relief Fund (WVRF), knows this too well.

WVRF was born in 2009 with a simple but noble goal – to support Florida's disabled veterans by relieving their financial strains and facilitating their transition to civilian life. The organization's beneficiaries are veterans of conflicts going as far back as World War II. Michael Durkee, an army combat veteran, was appointed as executive director in 2016, who says, "I am very grateful to be in a position to help my fellow veterans



during their greatest time of need." Michael, a former community liaison and board member, grew WVRF's network to support veterans throughout Florida. This expansion is critical, because Michael explains, "Florida is home to the third largest population of veterans in the United States – more than 1.5 million people."

However, even as the demand for services increased because

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FUNDRAISING EVENTS

The Arc Raises Nearly \$90,000 With WILD Pants

The Arc transformed its annual fundraiser adding a 2020 twist. Supporters stepped out in their sassiest slacks for the WILD Pants fundraiser bringing in \$89,000. Traditionally, The Arc recruited men from the community to model colorful pants in an effort to raise money to support programs for people with disabilities. This year, participants of all ages and genders were asked to make, decorate, or buy tricked-out trousers to battle for the championship title.

"Much of the world may have paused for the pandemic, our programs did not. We still had clients and their families relying on us



Tyson and Ender Mutchler



Jessica Gehring

A Gift For Giving The Community With A Heart

Each year, Ibis Charities, the official foundation of The Club at Ibis, accepts applications for grants from over 120 Palm Beach County nonprofit organizations. The mission of the foundation is to provide family and social services, health and wellness programs, educational, art, cultural and environmental opportunities.

This year, right before the traditional release of funds to the final applicants, COVID-19 took the world by surprise, impacting every facet of every life, whether it be in business and commerce, employment, health and even being able to be with immediate family members.

The foundation had to make the critical decision to reevaluate who to fund and help those charities that provide basic human needs such as food, medical care, housing and clothing. After the initial donations from



South Florida volunteers are distributing in Palm Beach County.

Good Works on page 2

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every day," stated Kimberly McCarten, president and CEO of The Arc of Palm Beach County. "These modern challenges pushed us outside of our comfort zone to create compelling ways to generate essential donations,

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GOOD WORKS *from page 1*



Palm Beach County Sheriff's officers are helping get food delivered in time for the holidays.

the season's fund raising events were distributed, the foundation once again asked the Ibis community to help in its efforts to alleviate the hardship rampant in Palm Beach County. The response to this Call To Heart was so overwhelming that it enabled the foundation to contribute multiple times to these frontline organizations providing essential services.

The last drive made it possible to feed thousands of people over the holidays. And it didn't stop there.

"The members of Ibis responded magnanimously to those far less fortunate," explained Sharon Bross, president of Ibis Charities. "While we may not be able to hold our traditional fundraisers like a fashion show, tournaments, a gala or girl's night out, the compassion and generosity of the members of The Club at Ibis made 2020 a record breaking year in donations."

In January, Ibis Charities was able to send funds to keep providing food as the numbers of unemployed people due to the pandemic continues to grow. By February, it is projected that Ibis Charities will have made donations approaching \$600,000, which once again confirms that The Club at Ibis has rightfully earned the reputation of being "the community with a heart."

SOUTHERN PROFILE *from page 1*

of COVID-19, the pandemic curtailed fundraising efforts. WVRF receives no government funding, and depends heavily on the goodwill of the public and its flagship fundraising events. Its signature event is its annual ball, which, like many large events in 2020, was canceled. This was potentially disastrous for the organization. "The ball is our largest fundraiser of the year and we heavily rely on the funds raised during the ball to help support the disabled veterans here in Florida," confides Caitlin Cronin, WVRF staff member.

But where there is a will, there is a way. Shannon Cake, WPTV NewsChannel 5 anchorwoman, is a usual master of ceremonies for the ball. When the event was canceled, she had the brilliant idea to host a telethon. This event occurred on Dec. 9, 2020 on WPTV from 6 a.m. to 8 p.m. Shannon Cake hosted the telethon, accompanied by Brian Edwards, senior vice president of development of the United Way of Palm Beach County. WVRF staff is thrilled to have met a match during the telethon to a \$50,000 donation from an anonymous foundation. One staff member, Alana, speaks her gratitude, "It could be a tank of gas to you, but it could mean keeping the lights on for a veteran."

The funds raised will be used in essential ways, especially because 86 percent of donations go directly to veterans. Upon their return to civilian life, veterans are often faced with many barriers to their transition. Suicides and homelessness are two real and common threats. Michael reveals that "there are 22 suicides per day" and that the organization "provides the critical support needed to keep our veterans and their families in their homes." To prevent homelessness, WVRF offers housing assistance in various forms: immediate shelter, rental assistance, eviction prevention, emergency home repairs, and assistance with utilities.

Many veterans are proud and hesitate to seek help, and as one says, "To ask for help means that I have failed." However, one WVRF staff member emphasizes, "They have earned the right to ask for our help." In addition to meeting its fundraising goal, WVRF staff embodied the December holiday spirit when they surprised a veteran, a single mother of three children, with a month of housing assistance, a \$250 Publix gift card, and \$100 Target gift card.

One hallmark of WVRF is its ability to help veterans quickly. In fact, during the telethon, while a veteran was making a donation, he learned about the pilot dental program, WVRF's partnership with a local dentist who provides pro bono services. Immediately, WVRF was able to secure an appointment for the veteran. Michael explains that many veterans have a gap in medical and dental insurance. To Lt. General (Ret.) Robert Chelberg, getting proper dental care is incredibly meaningful to veterans, because it improves their health, their ability to hold jobs, and helps them feel good about themselves. Indeed, Michael shares that the dental assistance program already proved to be lifesaving because when one veteran visited the dentist, an early stage oral cancer was discovered and successfully removed.

WVRF staff is very conscious of the financial strains experienced by many, and know that without much needed donations, they would have to make painful decisions to say no to veterans. Caitlin sums up their gratitude, "We appreciate everyone who supported us during this first time event, especially with there being so many unknowns." An emotional Michael assures donors, "Your money is going to save a life and help a veteran in need." As one veteran affirms, "This organization, it gives people like me hope."

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