



Tightening the black ties

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ABOUT THIS SERIES This week Showcase is exploring ways Chicagoans are dealing with The New Reality of today's economy. Coming Wednesday: What else you can get for \$18, soon to be the entry fee at the Art Institute.

"Thank goodness we don't have the Bernie Madoff problem, like they do down in Palm Beach," said veteran Chicago charity and civic doyenne Maureen Smith, with obvious sympathy for the charity scene in that Florida city long known for glittering "over-the-top" galas that have raised millions for worthy causes for many decades.

Smith, the chairwoman of the Joffrey Ballet with a reputation as a highly successful fund-raiser for many Chicago nonprofit organizations, was responding to a very simple question: How has the economic meltdown affected the charity scene in Chicago?

Even without being conned by the \$50 billion Madoff Ponzi scheme, many Chicagoans' bank accounts are far smaller than they were a year ago. Now that the core group of people who regularly attend and support black-tie fund-raising parties have been so severely hurt by the stock market tailspin, one might have assumed Chicago institutions that provide the foundation for the cultural life, social services, educational opportunities or health care and medical research in this city are hurting badly.

Chicagoans knowledgeable about fund-raising in this difficult year admit there are challenges they haven't faced in the past.

However, many counter that positives still exist. As just one case in point, Smith noted the recent biannual wine auction held for the benefit of the Lyric Opera of Chicago. "Look at what they raised. It was something like \$1.2 or \$1.3 million. That's a huge amount of money, especially given these very uncertain times." Looking toward her April 24 Joffrey gala, Smith insisted, "Things are going along fine. We have found that where in the past people would buy \$10,000 tables [for the event], they are now doing \$6,000 tables. It's a case where you have to simply sell more tables to make up the difference." Perhaps even more surprising is the May 9 glitzy and official grand opening night for the long-anticipated Modern Wing of the Art Institute of Chicago. The ticket price is a new Chicago record. The least expensive ticket is a staggering \$2,500 per person -- ranging up to a whopping \$10,000. Smith, a co-chair for that gala, reported "\$2 million is already in and the invitations have not even gone out yet. It's the party everyone wants to be at."

That's a point confirmed by Andrea Schwartz, the director of media relations and cause marketing for Macy's North and Macy's Midwest. "While people are cutting back and seemingly going to fewer black-tie parties or big social events this year, I think people consider attending that Art Institute

party an investment in a part of history," said Schwartz, comparing it the opening gala for Millennium Park. A key player in that Millennium Park event was Donna LaPietra, herself a member of many major Chicago area charity boards -- including the Shedd Aquarium, Green City Market, Chicago Botanic Garden, School of the Art Institute and Steppenwolf Theatre -- and a key participant in raising millions for various nonprofits. LaPietra says all organizations today have to "work smarter, think more creatively and find new ways to reach out to the community to support their goals." Considered to be a tireless fund-raiser, LaPietra says the realization of economic turmoil was detected fairly early on by members of Chicago's civic community. "Once fall '08 hit and things continued to get worse, dealing with how to confront this crisis was the No. 1 topic on everyone's agenda. How to address it. How to communicate with our key sponsors and donors ... that all became part of a very important equation."

LaPietra, along with Smith and Schwartz, pointed out appearances for social functions held to raise money for not-for-profit institutions became extremely important. "Everyone knew we had to scale down on things like flowers, decorations and 'goodie' bags."

Traditionally given to charity party attendees, the "goodie" bags -- often extravagant parting gifts donated by retailers and high-end manufacturers -- are nowhere as lavish as they once were. "Goodie bags" or pricier items donated for charities' silent auctions, live auctions or raffles, Schwartz said, are "not as common this year."

A member of the committee organizing the Harvest Ball for the Chicago Botanic Garden in September, who requested anonymity, confirmed, "We are getting things donated, but it's much, much harder than in the past, and a lot of stores and restaurants and hotels have had to turn us down, citing the economy." As an example of how party organizers are "thinking smart," LaPietra pointed to an April 23 fund-raiser for the School of the Art Institute, focusing on the school's fashion design program. "Instead of flowers on the tables, we're suspending the dress forms the students use over the tables. It costs nothing, and frankly is a nice way of tying in the decorations to what we actually do at the school," said LaPietra.

While still an expensive ticket, Steppenwolf's upcoming big annual gala, co-chaired by Mayor Daley's daughter Nora Conroy, decided to reduce its entrance fee for supporters by one-third. Even so, the price of admission to the evening's festivities at the Halsted Street theater complex is \$1,000 a person (compared to the \$1,500 a person charged last year).

Along with the obvious trappings of glamor, corporate donors -- especially banks and financial institutions -- do not want to be front and center this year, listed in charity programs as buying things like \$10,000 or even \$5,000 tables at big parties.

"It's another way companies are being creative," said Macy's Schwartz. "Instead of the corporation buying an expensive table and filling it with their executives or customers, they are making a similar donation to the organization from their corporate foundation. ... The charity still gets its money, but doesn't have to set up a table, decorate it or provide dinners for the people sitting there."

Schwartz used that example to point out that while organizations in Chicago seemed to be holding their own on contributions, "the party scene does seem a little smaller than in the past. ... That doesn't mean less events -- just somewhat fewer numbers of people at them."

Man-about-town **Neal Zucker**, a Goodman Theatre board member and a very visible presence at most Chicago charitable functions, agrees that people are making "smarter choices, being more selective and mainly focusing on the causes they really care about. "While people are still saying they will honor commitments to various charities, including those big gifts -- contributions to capital campaigns for example -- they are telling organizations that they may have to postpone, if not cancel, those cash contributions."

Another evident cost-saving measure is the increased number of e-mail invitations, as opposed to the traditional -- and often very expensive -- printed invitations sent via "snail mail."

"Yet another expense, like flowers, wine and the rest, you need to get underwritten," said Zucker, referring to the old approach. He pointed to an e-mail he received for Thursday's special donors preview of the new Holocaust Museum in Skokie, chaired by civic leader and philanthropist J.B. Pritzker. Colin Powell is the evening's special speaker, "and the whole thing is already sold out -- via e-mail," said Zucker.