



# Come for the wine, stay for the cause

Wine enthusiasts unite to raise funds for humanitarian action.

By Olga Deshchenko

For years, Arlene Willis served on the boards of her children's schools and was involved in the work of several social causes and foundations. But although she was successful at raising funds, their distribution remained a mystery. "Every time I raised money, I couldn't see where it went," she says.

So Willis decided to start her own foundation, which at first supported landmine victims, a cause to honor her brother, Louis Confrancesco. In 1968, he was killed in Vietnam when he picked up a landmine. But since its inception in 2003, the Grapes for Humanity Global Foundation, the organization Willis co-founded and now chairs, expanded its efforts to help many disabled men, women and children across the world.

To raise money for projects benefiting amputees, Willis decided to combine her fundraising expertise with a passion she shares with her husband – wine. "I've always raised

money for organizations through wine," she says. "I thought I'd put all of that together and start our own foundation, not thinking that it would take off as it has and take every minute of my life to run it," she jokes. "It's absolutely wonderful."

The Grapes for Humanity Global Foundation raises money for initiatives that aid the physically disabled through wine-related events, such as tastings, dinners and auctions. Willis works out of a home office and recruits high-end wine producers to donate bottles of their product for the events. "We've had in the neighborhood of \$50,000 to \$70,000 worth of wine donated to us," she says.

For the wine dinners held in New York, Dr. Christine Wheeler, who serves as the foundation's vice president, sells most of the tickets and sponsorships. An individual ticket to an event costs \$3,000 or attendees can pay \$25,000 for a table. Organizations can also serve as sponsors for the events. (Past sponsors include compa-

nies such as Mutual of America and Navios Maritime Holdings Inc.)

Willis plans and organizes the dinners by herself, as the foundation has no employees or administrative expenses. "We just have a personal touch to these events," she says. "When you're charging \$3,000 a person, you have to make sure the event is spectacular and nothing goes



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work. "People usually come because of the wine but when they get there, they get involved with us because they see what we do," says Willis.

The foundation's October event held in New York raised a record sum of \$300,000. It was held at Daniel, a popular French restaurant, where attendees enjoyed a meal prepared by Daniel Boulud and an assortment of five Cristal vintages donated by Louis Roederer for the event.

Once Grapes for Humanity settles the food bill for the dinner, all of the raised funds go directly to the project of its choice, which is determined prior to the event. "We personally go and visit the project before we give them the funds, just to make sure the money is going where it should be going," says Willis.

And the foundation's scope of initiatives is vast. For instance, in 2003, it raised \$50,000 for the Lavalla School, a primary school for disabled youth run by Australian Marist brothers in Cambodia. Grapes for Humanity helped the school build housing for staff and dormitories for the students. The foundation also started a music program there.

In 2005, it raised \$50,000 to fund the cost of demining three villages in Cambodia. It also donated funds to open the Vida Nueva Prosthetic Clinic in Choluteca, Honduras and supported several projects with the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation such

renovation of the dormitory at Khleang National Rehabilitation Center in Cambodia, which was destroyed by severe flooding during a typhoon.

### The Haiti effort

News of the massive earthquake that shook Haiti on Jan. 12, 2010 spurred dozens of humanitarian organizations into action, including Grapes for Humanity. The organization worked to mobilize supporters to raise funds for those affected by the disaster and formed the Grapes for Humanity/ U.S. Haiti Relief Effort.

Robert Pierot, a longtime supporter of the organization and the director and principal of Jacques Pierot Jr. & Sons, a New York-based shipbrokers firm, was determined to help. A call on the community of the worldwide shipping industry raised more than \$100,000 within two days. "We've never done anything like that without having an event," says Willis.

The funds benefitted the Klinik Hanger, a prosthetic and rehabilitation center established by the Hanger Ivan R. Sabel Foundation and several partners in Haiti. The clinic occupies a part of the space at the Hospital Albert Schweitzer in Deschapelles. It's outfitted with more than 13,000 pounds of prosthetic fabrication materials and equipment. Since opening its doors last February, the clinic has helped more than 750 amputees obtain prosthetic limbs. Klinik Hanger also trains local Haitians on sculpting and fitting prostheses and orthotics.

The efforts in Haiti don't end there. Grapes for Humanity has also established the Philip Craig Arts Program and the Viola Wheeler Music Program in conjunction with the clinic. The initiatives provide art and music therapy to the disabled men, women and children who stay at the facility. In a recent project, patients worked on making artisanal paper from sugar cane and banana fibers.



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Foundation members often visit the project sites to get a sense of the progress. Willis plans to visit the prosthetics clinic this month. "In Haiti, I really feel like we started from ground up," she says. "It's so good for us to see what's happening."

### Needed support

Although Grapes for Humanity focuses on prosthetics, it works with different medical facilities across the globe that tend to share a problem – lack of equipment. Often, the hospitals use the donated funds to purchase the necessary medical devices. The organization would welcome a financial donation or equipment to support the clinical teams working as part of its projects. "Any kind of equipment for a hospital can be used in any one of these countries," says Willis.

Of course, individuals or organizations can also attend the fundraising wine events hosted by Grapes of Humanity. On October 19, the foundation will put on an event at the Four Seasons Hotel in New York City. Opus One Winery will provide the wine, while Cristal will be a part of the champagne reception.

As the donated efforts of supporters fuel the organization's humanitarian work, Willis says any help is appreciated, whether it's money, medical equipment or time. "I just think that we all have so much and no matter what we can do to help those less fortunate than ourselves is great, no matter how small it is," says Willis.

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