

Festival of Trees held internationally as fundraiser

By Tara Marion

For nine years, the Junior League of Kalamazoo has used the Festival of Trees as its annual fundraiser to generate money for grants used throughout the community. But the popular festival isn't celebrated only in Kalamazoo.

In the United States, Canada and Australia, many organizations—hospitals, art institutes, symphonies and even other Junior Leagues—use Festival of Trees to raise money for their charities,

An annual conference, called "Festival of Trees International," provides an opportunity for delegates from these various organizations to attend workshops, share ideas and ultimately improve their festivals. Amy O'Connor, co-chair of Kalamazoo's Festival of Trees, and several other Junior League members were able to do just that earlier this year when the 1998 Festival of Trees International was held in Detroit, hosted by Children's Hospital of Michigan. The theme of the conference was "Destination Detroit."

We were really fortunate this past year (that it was so close so) we were able to send more than two people," said Mary Mellema, ways and means chair of The Junior League of Kalamazoo. "A lot of the committee chairs of this year's festival were able to attend, so they could talk about different areas of the committees that they were on."

O'Connor said the conference is "really an opportunity to learn more about the festival and ways to make it a better community event." She added that the Festival of Trees has happened in Kalamazoo for the past nine years, and the conference helps with ideas to keep it from being the same every year.

During their three-day conference in Dearborn, the Junior League members and approximately 300 other delegates listened to two motivational speakers: the vice president of Dayton Hudson Corporation, who talked about marketing, and Sonya Friedman, an internationally-known psychiatrist spoke about the importance of keeping a strong connection among volunteers, the community and the fundraiser. Delegates were also able to attend a number of different workshops dealing with different topics, such as finances, marketing, tree decorating, packaging, auctions, raffles, children's activities and galas.

On the first day of the conference, the delegates socialized and were asked to share one idea. "When you share one, you get back 20, and that's really what it's all about—to make everybody's festival a little more profitable," said Roseanne Gjostein, 1998 international chair.

Although this conference was mainly a workshop, next year's could be an expo—or any other type of gathering. Each year is different. The person who's holding it or the group that's holding it plans it based on recommendations from (the previous) year's conference," Gjostein explained.

The conference is held in a different city every year because charities that use Festival of Trees are spread throughout the United States, Australia and Canada. Since the first conference, held in Columbus, Ohio, in the early 1980s, the conference has also been held in Knoxville, Tenn; Atlanta, Ga. and Norfolk, Va. The 1999 conference will be in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

Gjostein explained why an organization would want to host a conference by using her charity as an example. Detroit's Festival of Trees for Children's Hospital of Michigan has raised over \$5 million in 13 years, which shows that volunteers from this organization know how to run a successful benefit.

“That’s a lot of money, and we thought because we’ve been around a long time and done it successfully, it was time for us to share what we know with the rest of the world,” said.

Of course, Detroit’s Festival of Trees is a bigger event than most because of its location, but in all locations the event is successful.

Mellema and Gjostein added that it’s more than a fundraiser—it’s a community event and a show, usually held in November or December to help kick off the holiday season and offer holiday decorating ideas.

People are also able to spend time with their families at events during the Festival of Trees.

As you look around our local Festival of Trees this November, you will be able to see some ideas the Junior League implemented from the Festival of Trees International conference, including crafts and signage improvements. Also keep in mind that as Kalamazoo’s Festival of Trees grows, the Junior League may choose to host a Festival of Trees International conference here, with a theme similar to Dearborn’s Destination Detroit: “Yes, there really is a Kalamazoo.!”