

2015 John Zino Civic Person of the Year: Tammy Flynn

By TOM FUSZARD

Many people volunteer for charitable events. Some people, like Tammy Flynn, owner of Elegance Spa & Salon, are born with a charitable spirit.

Flynn's gift of philanthropy started early. "I actually started doing some volunteer work at the age of 12," she says. At one point she was a Candy Stripper at West Allis Memorial Hospital. Later, she worked for Catholic Social Services and volunteered at local hospitals.

She came to appreciate the services that Make-A-Wish Wisconsin and Children's Hospital of Wisconsin do. Her third child, Marcus, is a special-needs child. As an infant, he often required extensive medical attention. Flynn owned a salon at the time, but sold it and accepted a third-shift position at Children's Hospital so she could devote her days to Marcus.

By age 5, in 2003, Marcus' condition had become more stable, which allowed Flynn to return to the salon business. She rejoined her former salon, at 2725 S. Calhoun Road, and rented a booth. The following year, she was looking to expand and the



Photo by C.T. Kruger

Tammy Flynn works with sons Marcus (left) and Dray on a puzzle in the Family Resource Center at Children's Hospital in 2011.

current owner was looking to sell, so they made a deal. After remodeling the building, Flynn reopened her new business, Elegance Spa & Salon, in April 2005.

Still interested in volunteering, Flynn participated in a local fundraising event in 2008. It was a rewarding experience, but also an eye opener. She realized that administrative costs took a bite out of the night's donations. Researching this, she discovered that administrative costs for local charity events consumed from 7-percent to as high as 30-percent of proceeds. She was determined

to develop a different model. And she did.

It was a novel idea, and it required a new mind-set. Ask businesses to donate their services — even if just a portion. Other businesses, even competitors, would be invited to help out. In the end, all the services would be provided free. "Then we could donate 100-percent back to these causes," she says.

She applied her method to her first event, held at the salon in December 2009. One restaurant could donate only some of the food, so she approached others

until she obtained the required amount.

Other businesses quickly came aboard. Signage, newspaper advertising, and the auction items were donated. The event raised \$10,000 for Children's Hospital. Not bad for what was supposed to be "a very small event."

Always thinking big, Flynn created An Evening Of Elegance. The first gala was held in April 2010. Crowne Plaza Milwaukee West donated the venue, food and staff. She lined up a designer to create a website and invitations. "I think we had 15 different restaurants, [and] 14 bakeries," Flynn says. Flowers and a DJ service were donated. Mark Baden, chief meteorologist for WISN-TV, agreed to be MC (and has done so ever since).

"It was pretty awesome to see all that come together," she says.

Over the years, Flynn has orchestrated several fundraising events. Time commitments forced her to focus on two: the gala and another of her ideas, Wishes in Wonderland.

Wishes in Wonderland, held at Dave & Buster's in Wauwatosa, offers a host of family-friendly activities, including a magic show, several hours of game time, art

projects and other programs. ESPN broadcasts its Miller Lite Football Show live. "There's something for everyone to do," Flynn says.

She launched Wishes in Wonderland in 2011. The 2014 event drew more than 1,200 people. "We maxed out the venue," Flynn says. Seeing all those people attending an event that started at 8 a.m. on a December Sunday "[was] enough to bring tears to my eyes."

Proceeds from both events are donated to Make-A-Wish and Children's Hospital.

Flynn readily acknowledges that a successful event requires assistance from all the donors and volunteers. "So though I might be winning an award, that award really goes to every single business owner; [every] individual mom and dad who embraces the cause."

Being selected Civic Person of the Year for 2015 is "an honor and a blessing," Flynn says. The award is an acknowledgment that the community recognizes her work, she says, but just as importantly, that people are coming together for great causes.

Visit Elegance Spa & Salon's at booth 21.

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