EMBRACING YOUR COMMUNITY
At Black Forest Pub & Grille in Three Lakes, about six weeks separate Oktoberfest from Oktoberfeast. The first is what you’d imagine: authentic German food, music, dancing.

And Oktoberfeast? It’s a free party for local children that takes over the restaurant on Halloween. Face painting, carnival-style games and make-take crafts are a part of it. So is the “Boo-fet” of hotdogs, chips, a salad bar, desserts and beverages. Parents indulge too, for either $5 or the donation of a healthy snack, which restaurant owners Marcel and Heather Biro take to the local elementary school.

Everybody shows up in costume. Staff volunteer their time with activities ranging from pumpkin carving to serving food. The generosity builds goodwill and loyalty that the Biros hope will deepen with the passage of time.

“We’re a small town,” notes Heather Biro, regarding Three Lakes, population 2,100. “Our community needs us, and we need them. As a seasonal destination, we would not survive if our local community did not support our business throughout the off-season, so from a business perspective it is important to be involved in our community.”

“But more importantly, from a personal perspective, we love our town and we want to see it thrive.” The Biros and their two young daughters moved to Three Lakes in 2004 when they opened the Black Forest Pub & Grille.

“We’re passionate about giving back to our community,” she says, and benevolence takes many forms. The local parent teacher organization, for example, benefited from 2018 Oktoberfeast proceeds. And when a bus isn’t full for Black Forest staff’s annual ski outing, the Biros open it up to families with children in school.

That’s all on top of providing gift certificates, merchandise and event sponsorships throughout the year. “We really never turn down a request for a donation, but we tend to focus our bigger giving (time, labor, finances) to organizations or activities that serve youth.”

Nearly everyone gives
Nine of 10 restaurants are involved in community service, says the National Restaurant Association. That happens through small to massive acts of kindness. It could mean writing a check to the local United Way, rewarding diners who make food pantry donations, sponsoring a Little League team, orchestrating a major fundraiser or serving on the board of directors at a local college or museum.

Why might a stretched-thin restaurant operator consider doing more? “It is astounding, the amount of good that results from community-minded restaurant owners and managers,” says Mike Van Asten of Liberty Hall Banquet and Conference Center in Kimberly.

“I applaud all who make an effort to better a troubled world.”

Years ago, while running a traditional restaurant, a panel of Van Asten’s employees would review applications for donations. His conference center is not

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open to the public in the same way, so philanthropic strategies shifted as Van Asten accepted volunteer leadership roles at St. Norbert College, the Milwaukee Public Museum and more.

“To put it bluntly, charitable giving is good PR, and it’s just good sense for businesses, especially small businesses that are dependent on their community to keep them in business,” writes Business News Daily.

The article goes on to say, “Charitable giving demonstrates that you give back to the community and that you’re in business not just to make a profit from it. As a small business, while you don’t get as large a tax deduction that large corporations and enterprises do, don’t overlook the other benefits you glean from philanthropy.”

Deeply personal choices
For some, charitable efforts reflect the personal challenges of staff or the restaurateur, and an intense commitment can produce profound results. Case in point: Jerry and Marie Arenas of Palmer’s Steak House, Hartland, who have raised $2.5 million for the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation over three decades.

Son Tony Arenas was diagnosed with the congenital condition 33 years ago, around the time his parents opened their first restaurant, Steakhouse 100 in Greenfield. Fundraising efforts began with a fishbowl for donations. Now the annual August Tent Event entices over 500 guests to eat, listen to music, bid on auction items and meet celebrity guests.

“We have a wonderful customer base,” Jerry Arenas says. “I believe people give to people—it matters that they know you and what your problems are.”

Fundraising has gotten even more focused because of his son’s double-lung transplant three years ago. When $240,000 was raised at the 2018 August Tent Event, $40,000 went to the University of Wisconsin’s Organ and Tissue Donation program. The remainder will help establish a professorship for transplant research.

“The importance of organ donation is huge,” Arenas notes. “We’ve created awareness throughout the state.”

Deciding who and how to help
At Zesty’s Frozen Custard, Green Bay, owner Ted Zieman has helped nonprofit organizations that reflect the personal struggles of employees. But that’s not all. The public, via Facebook, helps choose which good causes to support. A “Help Us Shake Up Cancer” promotion was linked to milkshake sales. For each month there is a targeted charity, which Zieman says translates into a three-store donation of $2,000 to $3,000.

“We’re local—it’s important to give back,” he believes. “It’s a form of advertising, but you can touch the hearts of people at the same time.”

In Fond du Lac, Schreiner’s Restaurant helps several hundred deserving groups per year, primarily through a gift certificate program. The applicant fills out a short form online, to explain fundraiser details.

At least 30 requests are received per month, and they are evaluated promptly. “We try to give to as many organizations as we can,” says Nathan Haupt, general manager. “The beauty of this program is that we can track each

Six Fast Facts About Charitable Giving

1. 94% of restaurants make charitable contributions.
2. 70% of restaurants make cash contributions.
3. 80% of consumers say restaurants are good corporate citizens.
4. Charitable giving from restaurants totals $3 billion per year.
5. Small businesses donate an average of 6% of profits to charity.
6. 75% of small businesses make some type of charitable donation.

Sources: National Restaurant Association, U.S. Small Business Association

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Six Quick Philanthropic Ideas

1. Beard and mustache contests raise money for a local food pantry at The Bay Restaurant, Whitefish Bay. Owner James McMahon’s facial hair has won international awards.

2. Nonprofits get $1 for every Donation Creation pizza sold at Door County’s Wild Tomato Wood-Fired Pizza and Grille. A volunteer fire department boosted sales by delivering pizzas via firetruck, then testing carbon monoxide and smoke alarms.

3. Saz’s in Milwaukee is a twice-weekly contributor and primary supplier to Just One More Ministries, which annually collects hundreds of thousands of pounds of food for families in need.

4. Coach’s Fast Food, Eau Claire, designates every November as Military Family Month and aims to raise $30,000 on behalf of the Veterans of Foreign Wars Unmet Needs program.

5. Landreman’s Family Restaurant, Kaukauna, organizes two blood drives per year.

6. One daily special at Blue’s Egg, Milwaukee, is the dedicated Egg Plate; $1 goes to the charity of the month.
Five Exceptional Neighbors
The Restaurant Neighbor Award is the National Restaurant Association Educational Foundation’s annual recognition of outstanding community service and philanthropic efforts. The foundation and American Express choose three national winners and award $10,000 to the winners’ favorite causes.

National winners are chosen from a pool of state winners. To make the NRAEF aware of your efforts, go to chooserestaurants.org and click on “industry involvement.”

Here are Wisconsin’s 2018 Restaurant Neighbor Award winners.

Cousins Subs – The family-owned corporation in Menomonee Falls established the Make It Better Foundation, whose quarterly grants focus on youth education, hunger and health/wellness. Since 2013, about $250,000 in grants were issued to 50 charitable causes.

Great Dane Pub and Brewing Company, Madison, Fitchburg and Wausau – More than $100,000 in annual donations and sponsorships support nonprofits that benefit youth, literacy campaigns and domestic abuse prevention. The annual Adopt-A-Family program provides at least $25,000 in Christmas presents to families in need.

Kavanaugh’s Esquire Club, Madison – An annual pancake breakfast in December feeds 800, raises $6,000 for food pantries and includes a visit with Santa plus a goodie bag. The event began 15 years ago and is similar to a breakfast that Kavanaugh’s sponsors before Easter.

The 75th Street Inn, Salem – The Kenosha County restaurant and its employees donated more than 1,000 hours in 2017 to develop mountain bike trails, sponsor a mountain bike team for local youth, host biking events and riding clinics. Volunteers also help maintain the bike trails.

Shellattés, Neenah – The coffeeshop owners chaired a March of Dimes fundraiser for 14 years and support other national and local nonprofits with donations of time, money and in-kind donations. They also partner with a local church four or five times a year to deliver up to 85 multi-course meals to families in need.

Setting parameters
Groups within a 10-mile radius of Red Circle Inn and Bistro are a priority for owner Norm Eckstaedt, whose focus “is usually to help those that help others in need, and to assist in getting their lives back on track.”

If an organization is asking for something, they should know who to ask, and ask personally.”
—Norm Eckstaedt, Red Circle Inn and Bistro

Other requests are evaluated case by case, and details matter to the proprietor. He rarely considers letters “blindly addressed to ‘manager’ or ‘donation office’ … If an organization is asking for something, they should know who to ask, and ask personally.”

On file is a record of all donations given. He checks to see if the restaurant received a thank you note for a previous donation. He verifies the tax-exempt status of applicants and usually supports only one event per organization per year.

Eckstaedt also pays attention to whether a stranger or customer is making the request because “it’s nice to partner with people you know and respect.” If the Red Circle Inn is hosting a large charity event, he asks to be a part of the event committee.

At Black Shoe Hospitality, Milwaukee, John Buchel says community involvement “is a core value that supports our mission.” An administrator “dedicates a significant amount of time to fielding requests and vetting groups.”

Who benefits? A wide range of

donation, so there is no duplication,” and the frequent review of applications means philanthropy is easier to absorb into daily operations.
causes that make a positive impact locally. “We try to stay away from direct contributions to religious organizations and political groups,” Buchel says.

Responding to tragedy
After the 2018 fatal shooting of Milwaukee Police Officer Michael Michalski, several restaurants held fundraisers for the family members including Sobelman’s and The Packing House. The SafeHouse and Newsroom Pub also held a fundraiser for which 50 percent of proceeds went back to the fallen officer’s family. “Not only were his friends and family involved, but it allowed all of our customers to contribute,” notes Peggy Williams-Smith, Senior VP of Safe House Restaurants.

That type of event hosting and give-back are not unusual for these and other Marcus Corporation properties. “Often, we select causes through our connections, whether it’s a cause supported by a regular customer, or if there is a business connection to the industry,” Williams-Smith says.

SURG Cares Foundation was formed after a 2012 fundraiser to help the children of Azana Spa shooting victims in Brookfield. Local families and children continue to be philanthropic priorities for the restaurant group. “This investment in the community is what drives SURG to care as much as we do,” says Omar Shaikh, Co-owner and President at SURG Restaurant Group.

Wisconsin Hospitality Group, based in Waukesha, introduced the

The Milwaukee Kitchen Cabinet
The Milwaukee Kitchen Cabinet is a group of restaurateurs who are committed to growing and preserving opportunity in the restaurant industry and strengthening the communities where they live and work.

The group works closely with non-profit organizations and elected officials to help make a difference in the greater Milwaukee community.

This group of restaurateurs in the Milwaukee area has made a positive impact by organizing more than a dozen events over the last two years including the 3 Days of Christmas and Sherman Park Revival events as well as Hispanic Heritage Month, Black History Month, Mental Health Awareness Month and Veterans Day Celebrations.

The Milwaukee Kitchen Cabinet is a partnership program between the Wisconsin Restaurant Association and the National Restaurant Association.

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Meaghan Fund in 2015, named after the daughter of two of the restaurant group’s managers. As she battled cancer, employer and employees pulled together to support the family. Now the fund provides grants to other employees in special circumstances, and co-workers donate through payroll deductions.

The mission of Care-a-lotta, the charitable arm of The Bartolotta Restaurants, is to support local nonprofit organizations and create platforms for awareness to help make Milwaukee a strong, vital community in which to live and work. Care-a-lotta supports the community in several ways.

A new, companywide initiative that began in 2018 allows each Bartolotta location to implement one goodwill initiative each year by selecting a cause and coordinating the effort. Efforts have ranged from a park clean-up to a boot drive.

Each month, $100 in Bartolotta gift certificates are donated to 40 applicants to be used in silent auctions, benefits, events and more. Applicants apply online and recipients are chosen via random lottery.

Annually, an all-expenses-paid gala is provided to one local, nonprofit organization to help generate awareness and funds for its mission. Applicants apply online and finalists are selected by the Care-a-lotta board.

In addition, nonprofits that host a special event at a Bartolotta location receive a donation equal to 10 or 15 percent of food and beverage costs. “It’s our way of thanking the community that has embraced and supported us,” Joe Bartolotta says.

Joe and Jennifer Bartolotta were the driving force behind bringing the ProStart® program, a curriculum and mentoring program designed to introduce high school students to the skills needed for careers in the restaurant and foodservice industry, to three Milwaukee Public Schools and enhancing the program already in existence at one school. They were the catalyst that helped rally other Milwaukee area restaurants, businesses and the community to raise over $250,000 for the Milwaukee Public Schools ProStart program.

Their involvement doesn’t stop there. Joe and Jennifer Bartolotta and Bartolotta Restaurants’ chefs have worked directly with students in the classrooms at Milwaukee Public Schools helping to mentor students in the ProStart program.

“IT’S OUR WAY OF THANKING THE COMMUNITY THAT HAS EMBRACED AND SUPPORTED US,”

—Joe Bartolotta

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