

STYLE

BELLE

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Personalities: Belles of the Ball

The women behind some of Richmond's big galas for bigger causes.

by *Brandon Walters Davis*

There are careers and there are callings. Some women combine the two, and others juggle them, along with families and a host of interests. Whatever the case, to say such women multitask is an understatement. Ask anyone who's served on a fundraising committee for a nonprofit or lived with someone who has.

Planning for a gala, which often begins as soon as the last event ends, involves countless meetings about everything from budgets to bands, sponsors to spritzers. And there's the matter of theme. It might be built-in or maybe it's born each year anew. Deciding how it's conveyed can be a breakthrough moment.

Big-ticket events that take place annually and raise tens, even hundreds, of thousands of dollars for local charities and institutions easily take on a life of their own. And while the heart of the event is the cause itself, its backbone is the organizer, whether it's a volunteer or a CEO.

Richmond is fortunate enough to have many such organizers. Together, their dedication and eye for detail helps draw more than crowds: It also helps raise awareness and dollars that improve communities through efforts to teach, rescue and save lives. And if we take note, their work may inspire imitation and catch on.

Here's a snapshot of four events that Richmonders mark on their calendars each year. They've all recently taken place, enabling their organizers the vantage point of hindsight, humor and a bit of humility. Most of all, these fundraisers and the women behind them show how one fabulous night fits into the big picture.



photo by Scott Elmquist



Who: Robin Robertson Starr (right) and Tamsen Heckel Kingry.

What: The Ninth Annual Fur Ball.

When: Oct. 5 (always the first Friday night in October).

Where: The Jefferson Hotel.

Why: To benefit the Cinderella Fund of the Richmond SPCA, which pays for the cost of treating and rehabilitating thousands of sick and injured animals at the Robins-Starr Humane Center.

By the Numbers: Grossed \$410,000, netted \$355,000. Attendance: sold-out crowd of 425. **Tickets:** \$175 per person, per pet.

A Closer Look: It began as a luncheon that raised an impressive \$75,000. But, as Robin Robertson Starr, chief executive of the Richmond SPCA, says: "It's got bells and whistles now." Starr, a former partner with the law firm Williams Mullen, says there likely wouldn't be a Fur Ball if she and her husband hadn't discovered a box of abandoned kittens while walking in their neighborhood on a sweltering summer day. That was 17 years ago. Today the Fur Ball is in its 10th year, along with Starr in her role as CEO. "It's the least stuffy and most beloved event in town," Starr said at this year's event. While the Fur Ball originated with Starr, its quarterback is Tamsen Heckel Kingry, the nonprofit's COO.

Who: Jenni Lee Crocker.

What: Sixth Annual State of the Art Ball.

When: Sept. 22.

Where: Science Museum of Virginia.

Why: To benefit the Hayes Hitzeman Foundation, supporting research and awareness of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS).

By the Numbers: Raised more than \$120,000 for SIDS research and awareness campaign. Attendance: 450. Tickets: \$100 apiece.

A Closer Look: Six years ago, Jenni Lee Crocker, a new business director for Ernst & Young, and her best friend, Kyra Oliver Hitzeman, were pregnant at the same time. So when Oliver lost her son to SIDS when he was 4 1/2 months old, Crocker lived the dichotomy of having a healthy baby and grieving for one who had died. "It is human nature to find out that part of mourning is researching" and looking for answers, Crocker says. Since it began in 2002, the Hayes Hitzeman Foundation has focused its efforts on creative branding to forward a message advocating SIDS awareness and research. Just four months after it was created, the Hayes Hitzeman Foundation raised \$75,000 for SIDS during a dinner at Cabo's restaurant. Its "This Side Up ... While Sleeping" campaign is reaching new parents through onesies bearing that slogan, which are distributed at hospitals across Virginia. Crocker says plans are to make the State of the Art Ball bigger and better each year in order to grow "This Side Up" into a nationally recognized campaign.



Who: Mary Kay Hull (left) and Anne Marie Elles on behalf of the Science Museum of Virginia Foundation.

What: The Second Annual Kugel Ball.

When: Oct. 5.

Where: Science Museum of Virginia.

Why: To benefit the Science Museum of Virginia and promote innovative science education.

By the Numbers: Netted \$80,000. Attendance: 350. Tickets \$225 apiece; after-hours party, \$85.

A Closer Look: "People need to understand science. It's so important to children and to adults," says Mary Kay Hull, a registered nurse and Science Museum board member who co-chaired the 2007 Kugel Ball with Richmond interior decorator Anne Marie Elles. During a recent lunch in the museum's café, the two organizers tallied the highlights of the event, which included dance instructors from Miami, a Mardi Gras-like procession by the band's horn section, and the seeming explosion of 300 white-feather boas that adorned guests' shoulders and were handed out as keepsakes. On the night of this year's Kugel Ball, the Science Museum was transformed into a luminous wonderland of blue, white and silver. The theme, "Dancing Under the Stars," appeared to live up to its name.

Who: Martha Slay

What: SMAsquerade 2007.

When: Oct. 13.

Where: Science Museum of Virginia.

Why: To benefit FightSMA/Andrew's Buddies, accelerating research and a cure for spinal muscular atrophy (SMA), the No. 1 genetic cause of infant death.

By the Numbers: Raised more than \$150,000 for direct research of SMA and associated diseases. Attendance: between 300 and 400. Tickets: \$125.

A Closer Look: Did you know that SMA is incurable, untreatable and fatal, and kills more babies than any other genetic disease? Martha Slay and her husband, Joe, have spent 16 years fighting to see that you do. They formed FightSMA/Andrews Buddies in 1991 after their son, Andrew, was diagnosed with the disease. Since then they've pushed for everything from awareness to treatment to legislation.

Seventeen parent-led chapters of FightSMA now exist nationwide, and it's been determined that research of SMA can directly complement that of many other diseases, such as Parkinson's and Alzheimer's. "Events are a hard way to make money," Slay says. They require an endless supply of energy and empathy, but they serve dual purposes. The SMAsquerade raises money for research and "fulfills the need to gather the community and acknowledge the hard work of people" who live with or are working to eliminate SMA.

