

Sports fan built nonprofit into a winner; Leader's connections help Sarasota Sports Foundation find success

By Anna Maria Della Costa
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Trish Fitzgerald has a decent backhand, a wicked serve and a penchant for playing the ringer.

On Friday, for instance, she gladly slipped into her red Adidas tennis outfit to sub for a player who had pulled a hamstring, risking newly manicured acrylic nails to make sure the Lunch Bunch Tournament at Harborside didn't miss a set.

Playing tennis meant ignoring her cell phone and missing dozens of calls about this weekend's Celebrity Tennis Classic -- one of two fund-raisers the nonprofit group she started relies on for money.

"I was in the kitchen cutting up vegetables for the event at this time last year -- we were so grass roots," said Fitzgerald, whose idea of cooking is picking up a prepared meal at Morton's Market.

Building things from the ground up and getting her hands dirty in the process is what she likes to do. Fitzgerald helped start the Sarasota Sports Foundation a year ago, combining her love for sports and her connections with the wealthy to raise money for children in need. It has since given more than \$300,000 into six local nonprofit organizations.

Observers say the foundation is successful because of the way Fitzgerald has used her connections for a cause.

"They've been able to save every penny and call on their friends," said Hal Hedley, executive director of the Child Protection Center, one of the nonprofit groups the foundation supports.

"Nobody on their board makes a dime. The celebrities they have on the board really care and take part in the events. There's not another organization like it around."

Fitzgerald's celebrity connections came through tennis and also golf, a sport she has since given up because she has "no patience."

In short order, she convinced local golfer Greg Band, the president of the board, and tennis players Barb Lancer, vice president, and Graci McGillicuddy, board chairwoman, to start a foundation for kids. In turn, they lured tennis great and Bradenton resident Petr Korda, who won the Australian Open in 1998, tennis superstar Martina Navratilova and AC/DC lead singer Brian Johnson to sit on Fitzgerald's advisory board.

"I'm not a socialite," Fitzgerald said. "I moved to Sarasota from Naples because it was getting too crowded and too ritzy. But my dad told me to surround myself with winners."

"That was his advice when I was going into junior high."

Fitzgerald, who drives a Jeep and lives in a town house in Gulf Gate, says she grew up searching for a cause. Her father was a home builder so the family -- she's the youngest of three -- lived in various cities along Florida's West Coast.

While her sister and brother grew up wanting to make it big in the business world, Fitzgerald roamed her neighborhoods asking people to sign petitions to save animals and the environment.

"I wanted to help the environment and all these other causes," she said. "I graduated from college knowing that I didn't want to work in the private sector but with the public and nonprofits."

"I knew I wanted to travel, too."

After graduating from the University of South Florida with a degree in business economics, she served in the Peace Corps from 1992 to 1994.

During that span, she helped start a Junior Achievement program in Armenia to reach every region in the country in four languages.

After the Peace Corps, she moved to Seattle and helped start Bionetwork, an Internet company. She moved to Florida in 1998 when her father fell ill to be with him and her mother, who lived in Naples.

Her father died, and she moved to Sarasota that same year.

"I fell in love with this city when I visited it once in college," she said.

"When I moved here, I knew that I wanted to start something that I could make sure and keep it local. I could be in control of that. That's why I didn't go off and work for another nonprofit."

She called McGillicuddy -- a local philanthropist who supports several organizations dealing with children -- and asked her to lunch. From that meeting came another meeting, and the Sports Foundation was born.

"Trish is the person who's going to say, 'Hey, let's do this,'" Lancer said. "She's going to keep everyone on track and in the loop. She's the glue."

"She gets things done quickly."

And she takes her dad's advice every chance she gets.

"Having the connections helps," Fitzgerald said. "But even more, you couldn't have hand-selected and surrounded yourself more with a group of people who truly believe in this cause. They're not just buying into it; the board created this vision."

Which, observers say, is another reason the foundation is thriving.

"The Sports Foundation has been so successful because of the board members' collective passion for the mission," said Teri Hansen, the president/CEO of the Gulf Coast Community Foundation of Venice.

While experts with the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy fear foundations aren't giving back enough money to society, the Sports Foundation gave 64 percent of its nearly half million-dollar net revenue in 2005. A recent Chronicle of Philanthropy report found that foundations gave a median of 4.5 percent last year.

"Most foundations are going to save up money, invest it and give money away over a period of time," Fitzgerald said. "As soon as we make it, we give it away. We want to see a \$0 balance in our account."

"My vision for 20 years down the road is we're going to somehow change laws so children aren't being abused anymore. My foundation is going to find a way to cut the cycle off."

This weekend's tournament, which wraps up today at the Longboat Key Club, will gross nearly \$200,000 for the Sports Foundation. The foundation's other fund-raiser is a golf tournament in November.

But come fall, don't expect Fitzgerald to sacrifice a manicured hand. She excelled in basketball, volleyball and track in high school in Gainesville.

She plays tennis four times a week at the Bath & Racquet Club and has made the sport her nonprofit's foundation.

She isn't any good at golf.

It was never her niche.

Interested?

The Sarasota Sports Foundation hosts two major fund-raisers a year -- a celebrity golf tournament in November and this weekend's Celebrity Tennis Classic at the Longboat Key Club.

The tennis classic began Saturday and runs through today at the Longboat Key Club.

For more information, call 387-1634 or 812-4017.

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