

Gritty Details Are Behind the Glitter at Fund-Raising Galas

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Wealth Matters

By PAUL SULLIVAN

HUNDREDS of New York's judges and lawyers will gather on Saturday in the grand ballroom of the Waldorf Astoria hotel to honor one of their own, John A. Barone, a New York Supreme Court justice in the Bronx, who will receive this year's Rapallo Award.

The award has been given annually for the last 50 years to an outstanding member of the legal community — including two sitting justices of the United States Supreme Court, Samuel Alito and Antonin Scalia.

But until the crowd is seated, Marianne E. Bertuna, a criminal defense lawyer in New York City who is the chairwoman of the luncheon, has been worrying about the small stuff — everything from hiring the videographer to which tables to put 450 lawyers, jurists and dignitaries.

“You're dealing with so many members of the judiciary that you want to make sure everything is right,” she said. “Egos need to be considered.”

And that includes telling some judges that they are not important enough to sit on the dais. “There are rules about who sits on the dais,” she said, noting that those who are not at least a State Supreme Court judge will be sitting with everyone else. “Telling them that is a little awkward, to say the least.”

With the gala season in full swing, such delicate conversations are par for the course. Yet these events, some more glittery than others but all important to their organizations, serve a purpose beyond ego-stroking: They raise a lot of money.

“Many major New York City charities and many major charities cross the country raise a very substantial portion of their annual budget through galas,” said Melissa Berman, president and chief executive of Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors.

She pointed to the Robin Hood Foundation gala, which attracts the hedge fund elite. It raised \$60 million last year.

And the person chosen or coerced into being the chairman of an event has a large role in the event's success. It's hard work.

Ms. Bertuna, who is in her fifth year as chairwoman, said the meetings



“You're dealing with so many members of the judiciary that you want to make sure everything is right,” said Marianne Bertuna, who organized an awards lunch. Michael Appleton for The New York Times

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began last June. In addition to leading the committee that organizes the event, she helped select the honoree — and ordered his plaque — bought a table and had her firm buy three more at \$2,000 a table, and made sure the Waldorf had all the special meal orders.

“Up to the last minute, I’ll try to meet everyone’s request,” she said. “You need to know the deadlines that are real and not self-imposed.”

She added, “I have a very busy legal practice, but I put aside two solid weeks before the event.”

The most prolific gala heads are relentlessly organized.

“You need to be a team leader,” said Jean Shafiroff, a philanthropist who runs eight charitable galas a year in New York City and the Hamptons. “If someone has done the job, you need to give them a leadership role and give them enough autonomy to do the work.”

Ms. Shafiroff’s events range in size and scope. The summer gala for the Southampton Hospital raised a total of \$5.4 million over the three years she headed the event. Others have more modest goals like the New York Women’s Foundation, which raised over \$870,000 at its gala last year.

Not all events raise even that much money. For all her work, Ms. Bertuna expects Saturday’s event to raise \$10,000 for law school scholarships for the Columbian Lawyers Association, which gives the Rapallo Award.

At other events, there are leaders who know their role is to bring in the money. Howard Lorber, chairman of Douglas Elliman Real Estate, is the honorary chairman of this year’s summer gala for the Southampton Hospital and also chairman of the hospital’s foundation. He said he knew the hospital reached out to him for his connections.

“People weren’t going out and asking,” he said. “I helped them get more aggressive in asking.”

All of this asking raises another burden on leaders: the need to reciprocate.

Mr. Lorber said this goes only so far. “Just because you ask someone for a \$5 million gift doesn’t mean they’re asking you for a \$5 million gift,” he said, referring to the gift to Southampton Hospital by the billionaire hedge fund manager John Paulson. “On a lower level, friends ask you for a gift and you give back to their charities. I don’t have a problem with that.”

In addition to the eight events she heads, Mrs. Shafiroff estimated that she attended over 100 other events each year. She tries to help out her friends the way they help her — with checks — but she said she has learned not to get miffed if someone doesn’t give to her event.

“If they say no, I thank them,” she said. “Sometimes they can’t do anything this year but maybe they’ll do something major next year.”

Gillian Minter, a philanthropist who has headed some large, lucrative galas for the Central Park Conservancy and the New York Botanical Garden, said she tried to tailor her invitations to people she thought would be interested in a certain event.

“You’re an ambassador for your cause,” she said. “I always buy a table and fill it with people who are big donors to the causes or people who

have never attended and I think they'll like the cause.”

But she said she understood the brushoff when she received it, having given it herself. “It’s not that you say no,” she said. “It’s that you just don’t say yes.”

Beyond raising money, the leaders need to think about bringing in new people and raising the profile of the event or group.

“When someone is honored at a gala, even if that person is paying for a table and inviting colleagues, his guests learn about the organization in a very compelling way and they often become new donors to that organization,” said Ms. Berman, the philanthropic adviser.

The events that work the best, she said, are the ones that offer people an insider’s view of the organization or the people it serves.

“Maybe it’s a private tour of the art,” she said. “Or you listen to a young woman who overcame horrific circumstances that got her into the sex trade and now she’s out and is telling her story.”

She said the events that didn’t do as much good for a cause were the ones focused too much on honoring people within the organization. While this is important, it misses an opportunity to increase the number of people who know about the cause.

Several years ago, the philanthropist Cheri Kaufman attended a small event for Lifeline New York, a group founded by Princess Katherine of Serbia to raise money for Serbian children and women.

“When I heard the princess speak, I volunteered to chair the next event,” Ms. Kaufman said.

That was four years ago. She has since been the host of four luncheons at Le Cirque for the group as part of what she called a five-year plan to raise the group’s profile in New York.

“When you’re a new person on the block, it’s difficult,” she said.

The big, glamorous events have a different issue: It is sometimes hard to maintain the focus on the goal of aiding the charity’s mission. Mrs. Miniter said that three years ago she offered her gala skills to a friend, Tom Gold, a retired principal dancer with the New York City Ballet who had started his own dance company. She got to know him at ballet galas and attended his first opening night fund-raiser for his own company. It was less than successful.

“I went up to him after and said, ‘Tom, did you make money for your dance group?’” she said. “He said, ‘Well, I just want to bring people in.’ I said, ‘Would you mind if I helped?’”

The following year, she and two friends headed the event and raised \$50,000. They did the same last year.

“That’s not a big event in the grand scheme of things, but that was huge for him,” she said. “After that night, I had several people come up to me and say that was the most fun night of the year.”

Next year, they plan to expand the event, which is, of course, the goal of any gala.

Correction: April 17, 2015

An earlier version of this article, using information from a publicist, misstated the name of an organization and the amount of money its

gala raised last year. It is the New York Women's Foundation, not the New York City Women's Foundation, and it raised over \$870,000, not \$60,000.

Correction: April 22, 2015

An article on Saturday about the detail involved in organizing a charity gala rendered incorrectly part of the name of a New York institution that raises part of its budget through such galas. It is the New York Botanical Garden (not Gardens).

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