

Phoenix Heart Ball's Golden Anniversary

Written by Christine Whitton / Photographed by Cassandra Tomei
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As the final touches are made on the Phoenix Heart Ball's 50th anniversary gala, we look back on the organization's many accomplishments and the women behind the ball - from then to now.



As one of the oldest and most sophisticated social events of the season, the Phoenix Heart Ball lends a voice to heart disease by raising money and awareness for vital community programs, professional education and research that benefits the American Heart Association. It started with Peggy Goldwater, wife of Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater, at the Jerry Lewis Koko Theater Restaurant in 1959. Her pledge to fundraise, coordinate and host the most lavish soiree at that time held true, raising \$10,000 in donations and setting a new standard for future committees to surpass.

Today, 50 years later, the Phoenix Heart Ball has grown to be one of the most anticipated galas benefitting the nonprofit American Heart Association. Over the past five decades, the ball has wined and dined over 25,000 guests and raised more than \$27 million. Its committee members, generous donors and A-list entertainers, (which have included Sammy Davis Jr., Florence Henderson, Engelbert Humperdinck, Bob Hope, Nat King Cole and Josh Groban) help to pull together this dazzling evening, complete with heart-healthy dinners, dancing and designer gowns, all in the Valley's most dramatically dressed ballrooms.

Behind the scenes, the money collected from the Phoenix Heart Ball goes to help advance education and training in areas of CPR, pacemakers, bypass surgery, heart transplants, echocardiograms, coronary arteriography, heart-lung machines, heart transplants and anti-rejection therapy drugs. Statistically, a heart attack happens every 20 seconds, and knowledge saves lives.

This year, the Heart Ball committee will introduce two new initiatives: one to educate 7th graders on CPR and the second, to renovate the Halle Heart Center into a full children's museum. After last year's \$2 million fundraising ball, this year's committee wants to surpass that number while also focusing on funding cardiovascular research and educational programs in Arizona and beyond. In doing so, this year's Phoenix Heart Ball, at The Phoenician Resort, will be the country's most successful fundraising gala for the American Heart Association.

Here, we speak with previous Heart Ball chairs about their commitment to making a difference, the year's biggest challenges and their most rewarding benefits.

Nan Howlett



Husband: C.A. Howlett, Senior Vice President of Public Affairs for U.S. Airways
Heart Ball Chair: 2008
Money raised: \$2.4 million
Her gown: "A red Kevan Hall gown, which he made for the 2008 Heart Ball."

Nan Howlett returned home to Scottsdale in 2001, after living in Paris for about 18 years where she worked for Lancôme, a division of the L'Oréal Corporation. Her luxurious lifestyle afforded her family many leisurely strolls through Paris visiting their favorite corners of the city, including the Eiffel Tower and Luxembourg Garden.

Since returning to the Valley, Howlett's perspective on life has changed, focusing 100 percent of her time on community volunteer work. "My big motivator was my husband, who had very serious blood clots in his lower leg after knee surgery. Those blood clots wound up passing through his heart (which could have easily caused a heart attack) and lodging in his lungs, known as a pulmonary embolism," Howlett says. Her desire to make a difference elevated her to the position of 2008 Phoenix Heart Ball chairwoman where, for one year, she gave it everything she had. "I actually had a sign on my door [at home] that said, 'In case you're asking, the answer is no, I have Heart Ball,'" Howlett chuckles. Although Howlett approached the position with a full-time mentality, the women on her committee went to great lengths to help make the event a success. "I stood on the shoulders of giants," she says.

Susie Wesley

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Husband: Tim Wesley, with Barrett-Jackson Auction Company

Heart Ball Chair: 2007

Money raised: \$1.8 million or "According to Sandra Hijikada, executive vice president for the American Heart Association, my final numbers were \$1.836 million."

Her gown: "A strapless Ralph Lauren metallic gown with incredible crystals on the bodice and a great train that pooled behind me. The exquisite fabric came from a French chateau's drapes—no kidding! I admit I fell madly in love at first sight."

Susie Wesley undoubtedly knows how to multitask—in 2007, she juggled a full-time career as a realtor with her commitment to fundraise for the year's most glamorous party. But, according to Wesley, life wasn't always so enjoyable. In 1978, her then 50-year-old father suffered a heart attack five months before her wedding, forcing him to undergo triple bypass surgery. Practicing good diet and exercise, Wesley spent the next 19 years campaigning for the Phoenix Heart Ball, but says 2007 was her most emotional year. As chairwoman, Wesley's biggest challenge became even tougher when her family life began to suffer from the economic downturn, and she considered stepping down. It was her committee's overall support, her faith and dedication to the cause that encouraged Wesley to press on. "Sometimes I wonder how different my life would have been if I had walked away, but then I smile because I know the Heart Ball chairmanship was one of the best gifts God ever gave me—despite my personal circumstances," she says. That same year, Wesley made possible "Have a Heart for Babies" (an infant CPR kit for the American Heart Association) and "Treasured Hearts" (a division for women who have been on the Heart Ball committee longer than seven years, but are not completely active).

Carole Moreno



Husband: Arte Moreno, owner of the Los Angeles Angels

Heart Ball Chair: 2002

Money raised: \$1.3 million

Proudest Moment: "Having the opportunity to show appreciation and recognition to our donors the night of the ball."

As a mother of two, Carole Moreno has been a homemaker and community volunteer most of her life. But, as chair of the Phoenix Heart Ball, she was heading a benefit that touched close to home. "I feel as a family we have directly benefited from the good work they [the American Heart Association] do," Moreno says. "My mother has some issues with irregular heartbeats and has been in and out of the hospital with issues concerning her heart."

Taking the reins just after 9/11 posed unique obstacles Moreno remembers all too clear. "It could have been a more difficult time to approach corporations and individuals for fundraising. However, I was humbled by the support that came in at all levels," she says. "The truth is, heart disease touches everyone in some realm or another."

Moreno's full-time role coordinating, fundraising and managing the organization's numerous committees and subcommittees paid off at the year's most dashing dinner party, which collected more than \$1 million in donations. "The wonderful thing about this committee is that it's made up of dedicated women, whom I have made the greatest friendships with," Moreno says.

Penny Gunning

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Husband: Larry A. Gunning, owner of Pasco Petroleum Industry

Heart Ball Chair: 1990

Money raised: Around \$500,000

Proudest Moment: "We were able to designate dollars to stay in the state of Arizona, some of which went toward pediatric heart disease."

Penny Gunning, a former teacher at Phoenix's Clarendon Elementary School, has always viewed the glass as half full. At 29, her then 56-year-old father passed away after suffering a massive heart attack. Since then, Gunning has taken an active role in raising money and research awareness for the American Heart Association—a stance she is still passionate about today.

As Heart Ball chair of 1990, Gunning recalls very different times, but she remembers being extremely eager to embark on her new role and avoiding near disaster with her dress. "In 1989, Michael Casey was a very new designer (who was showing his designs at Beatons, a Phoenix-based boutique). [Michael Casey] shipped my dress out of San Francisco right before the 1989 earthquake destroyed his shop," Gunning says.

Looking back, Gunning says her biggest challenge in leading the event was securing enough seating as well as ensuring her committee knew just how valuable they were in making the event happen. Gunning still pounds the pavement in hopes of raising more money and awareness for research; although she admits her most valued time is spent with her children and grandchildren.

Harriett Friedland



Husband: Jack A. Friedland, plastic surgeon

Heart Ball Chair: 1984

Money raised: \$95,000-\$100,000

Advice: "Heart Ball chairs need to have fun, make friends and be inclusive. It's about making money, not spending it."

For the past 30 years, Harriett Friedland's prestigious modeling career has had her gracing the pages of many glossy publications, but 25 years ago she was asked to smile for a different cause. After joining the 1983 Heart Ball committee, members asked if she would graciously chair the 1984 ball. She was thrilled to accept.

During the time in which Friedland was chairwoman, the Valley was much less populated with far less attention on glitz and glamour.

"We didn't have advisors, it was much simpler then. When you were the chair you just did it," she says. But then again, the event was done on a much smaller scale as well.

"My year, about six weeks before the event we had so many people coming, around 600, we had to move the event from the Arizona Biltmore's Grand Ballroom to the Conference Center Ballroom. That was a real panic. We only had so many centerpieces and so much financing for the centerpieces," Friedland recalls. But, the committee (which consisted of 10 women) made do and the evening went off without a hitch.