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Donations pour in from soup-er events

TIFFANY L. PARKS | Daily Reporter
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One bowl at a time, the team behind Columbus SOUP is revamping the landscape of philanthropy in central Ohio.

Revolving around a simple concept, the all-volunteer initiative features quarterly community events where attendees pay a minimum \$7 donation for a bowl of soup and the opportunity to vote to fund local projects that demonstrate a positive impact on the community.

Since the first SOUP event, in June 2013 at Brother's Drake Meadery, to the sixth, and most recent, gathering at High Line Car House Nov. 9, the crowd-funded grant creation program has raised more than \$10,000 to fund area ventures such as the Girl Power Technology Workshops with TECH CORPS.

With 100 percent of the entrance donations used to fund the SOUP grants, all of the food, desserts, raffle items and the venue for each event is donated by individuals and businesses.

The six-member Columbus SOUP leadership team says they haven't reinvented the wheel with the growing program but are ecstatic to have it in the Capital City.

After a friend told her about Detroit SOUP, Liz Martin, who adopted Columbus as her home nearly 15 years ago, reached out to one of its organizers to pick her brain.

After bringing together a local team, the group had its first meeting in January 2013.

"Since then, the team and our events have grown and evolved. We decided early on Columbus SOUP needed to be sustainable both internally and in the community," said Martin, the program's executive director.

"We are so grateful for the increasing support the community has given us. Each event we see a lot of new smiling faces both in the audience and on the volunteer team. We went from one volunteer in June 2013 to over 40 volunteers (this month)."

With entities like Two Caterers Contemporary Cuisine, The Kitchen and Square Plates donating the fare and groups of volunteers on hand to make dinner service flow smoothly, SOUP Director Keith Miles said the team is proud to run a volunteer-based operation.

"Without our volunteers, we simply wouldn't exist," he said, adding that at the first soup attendees served themselves.

"Today, we rely on our volunteers to improve the experience of our attendees. By having volunteers serve soup, greet attendees and support the event overall, we are able to execute our event in such a way that people keep coming back."

From early on, Miles said local businesses have been excited about the program.

"The reaction by the local business community has been unbelievable ... we have very little budget,

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so we rely on those restaurants, chefs, venues and other businesses that are willing to donate to our events. Without them, we very honestly wouldn't have Columbus SOUP," he said.

In addition to donations pouring in, Martin said each SOUP event gets an increased number of applications from "amazing people and organizations with projects focused on making a difference in our community."

During the events, grant applicants present five-minute proposals and attendees vote for a winner.

"I think the most rewarding aspect of putting on SOUP is seeing the community come together and make these events happen," Martin said.

"The Columbus SOUP team just creates a frame work and an opportunity, but it's the community: citizens, businesses, organizations and individuals, that make SOUP what it is. They all come together to make a difference once a quarter and it is so inspiring."

The next SOUP event is slated to take place in March.

Volunteer opportunities are posted on the program's website, columbussoup.org, about 45 days in advance.



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