

Pancakes in Paradise

Parrot Heads in Michiana raise fun, funds

Flip-flops on feet, margarita in hand, Parrot Heads aren't wasting anything in Michiana.

Social and socially conscious, some 80 Jimmy Buffett fans are giving their time and raising money for people who need such things as groceries, organ transplants and Christmas presents, and pets who need food.

Parrot Heads in Michiana, chartered as part of 215-club Parrot Heads in Paradise in late 2004, has donated some \$40,000 and 2,500 hours to local, regional and national charities, raising phunds with phun.

"I refer to us as 'Rotary on margaritas,'" says founder Jan Caudell, who noticed the national group online and gathered fellow Parrot Heads for service. "We all have that tropical, irreverent kind of attitude.

"We have a great time. We do great community service projects. It's kind of like the best of both worlds."

With a membership that ranges in age from the 20s to 80, and yearly dues of only \$25 a person or \$35 a family, the club is part of a new wave of charity — call it Philanthropy 2.0 — bringing in folks who can't afford \$100-a-plate dinners and don't want to sit around in suits and ties.

"I can't pay \$100 to go to a dinner, but I can still do something," says Caudell, a public school teacher. "You want to help out some way. Maybe you can just afford to give your time. You don't just have an interest. You feel a responsibility to help other people."

Parrot Heads hold that concern in common, along with their love of the music and relaxed lifestyle that cuts across generational lines.

"Age-wise, it's pretty diverse," she says. "We have a lot of couples. We have singles. Pretty much we all had Buffett in common," as well as a broader appreciation for the tropical genre.

"The whole thing got started with some Buffett fans saying 'If we could gather all this energy of all these people, we could do something good.' We all have a desire to improve our communities."

Business meetings are the third Sunday of each month — and even loose change exchanged for Milk Duds at the meeting goes to help people. Phlocktail hour, a purely social outing, is the first Tuesday of each month. The

phunny spelling is part of the culture.

"Everything that usually has an 'f' has a 'ph,'" Caudell explains. "It's so automatic to do that when you write e-mails to the club. At my job, I have to think about it."

The club partners with a variety of local institutions, including Applebee's, the University of Notre Dame, the Silver Hawks, Penn High School and Martin's Super Markets to help individuals and agencies, including REAL Services, the Northern Indiana Food Bank, The Bridge at Studeo 315 and Pet Refuge.

"We have usually anywhere from eight to 10 other service fundraiser type things we do throughout the year," Caudell says. "We do a water station for the Sunburst marathon. In the fall, we always have what's called an 'empty bowl' dinner."

Penn High School students make the ceramic bowls used to serve the meal, and participants take them home to remind them: "In our community we have people with empty bowls," she says. "There's never a shortage of need."

The club partners with Applebee's for a benefit pancake breakfast to raise money for people who need organ transplants. The first was for Leighton Akins, of Goshen, a 5-year-old who needed a heart transplant, got the new

heart and this year plans to participate in the Transplant Olympics.

Leo Akins, Leighton's father, says the Parrot Heads were strangers who became friends and stay in touch.

"The neat thing about it was having a bunch of people who didn't know us from Adam," he says. "It was just fun. They made it fun. They had a magician walking around."

The club hopes to hold another fundraiser to help Leighton, now 8, go to the Transplant Olympics in Pittsburgh in July.

"It just doesn't stop with them," Akins says. "They'd give you the shirt off their back."

This year, the \$7-a-plate breakfast at Applebee's will help a young woman in Elkhart who needs a double lung transplant and a pancreas transplant.

"People are willing to help you out with stuff," Caudell says. "They know exactly where their money's going. At every event, we have a lot of music, all the fun stuff. It's not just one of those stuffy things. It's a different event.

"You can wear flip-flops and jeans, and you're good. This is not like a social status kind of thing. We're having a great time, and look at all the good we can do. You can't separate the two. They go hand in hand."

With another hand free to hold the margarita.

Parrot Heads in Michiana line up for a group photo.

