

Optimist Club of Arlington

The Optimist Club in Arlington is known as one of the oldest and the largest clubs in Optimist International. To understand our success, we must first look at our history. Our club elected our first president in 1945, started baseball in 1953 and football in 1960. One of our earliest youth projects was to help the Arlington High School's Future Farmers Club with their animals. We have provided athletic, scholastic and community oriented activities for the children of Arlington, Texas for almost 70 years. Our current projects include sports, scouts, oratorical and many other projects that service our community. We have had as many as 500 members and currently have around 300. As with all clubs, we have struggled to keep existing members and attract new members. We believe we have found a balance.

One thing we recognized early on for the success of the club was we needed community support. What better way than to get involved with the local school district. We have a great relationship with Arlington Independent School District as well as the individual schools. AISD has started sending our flyers for our sports program through their interschool mail at no cost to us. Our Superintendent and Board members attend our Youth Appreciation Dinner every year. Individual schools support our Oratorical Program; invite us to their field days and Open Houses, and ask us to attend many other functions that they have.

Another thing we saw a need for was some type of sports for the children in the Arlington area. We started a baseball program. It started with just a few teams, but it slowly grew as high as 70 teams. A few years later our football program started and grew to be as many as 90 teams. Over the past several years the numbers of the teams have dwindled down. One reason for this decline was that more we are no longer the only organization offering sports programs. There are

both select and recreational programs available to the youth of Arlington, so we started asking the parents, coaches and people in the community how we could improve our program. Since most of our members are coaches, some who no longer have children in the program, we listened to their suggestions and became involved in the National Pony Baseball League and USA Football League.

Since affiliating ourselves with Pony, we have sent All Star teams to their league tournaments for the past four years and last year our Mustang team went all the way to the semi finals of the World Series. We have had several teams leave other local organizations to join our league because we do send teams to these Pony tournaments. In football, we have been associated with USA Football for a few years and this has given our football coaches resources they did not have before. Our team numbers have started to slowly increase and are currently around 45 teams for baseball and around 60 teams for football this past season. By listening to the coaches and parents wants and needs, we have kept members and attracted new ones.

Another area that we recognized needed attention was in the area of scholarships. We began our Oratorical Program and Youth Appreciation Program to help the young people in our area have a way obtain money for college. Those who are in elementary and junior high who are articulate and enjoy speaking are able to compete for scholarships at the upper level of competition. Our Youth Appreciation Program awards scholarships for \$1000 to one person from each of our high schools, totaling 6 honorees. We also award plaques to one student from each junior high, totaling 12 honorees. These are young people who are not the top students, but those who exhibit leadership and may have overcome some obstacle and still stayed in school. This past year we had 140 people attend to celebrate these young adults. We were honored to have a speaker from the University of Texas at Arlington and members from Arlington ISD School Board. Some of the

people in attendance became members of the Optimist Club of Arlington after attending the ceremony because of our work with young people. We have a Sponsor who donates the money for these scholarships as well for several end of the year scholarship available to seniors who plan on attending UTA or Tarrant County College.

We are lucky enough to have professional, semiprofessionals and college sports teams around us that are happy to help out when possible. We invite these people to our opening day events in both baseball and football. The past few years we have had Texas Christian University Baseball players, Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders and the Mascot for the Texas Rangers and Dallas Cowboys come out to these events. Our members, parents and children love to meet these “local heroes”, especially the mascots. We have had tickets donated to our program from the UTA Baseball program, TCU baseball program and the Airhog Baseball organization. We get free publicity from their attendance through their organizations as well as the local newspaper, which has a section that reports local nonprofit organizations events.

Attracting new members and keeping existing members is a challenge even for our club. We try to provide our new members with information about where dues go, activities we provide, as well as community service programs we support. We encourage spouses and children who are 18 years and older to join. We welcome all our members to come to our meetings to see how we operate and everything we do behind the scenes. Fellowship is very important to our club. We encourage all our members to attend dinner meetings that we have twice a month at a local restaurant, who is also one of our major sponsors. We invite a speaker to come speak to our group. We provide a meal for the speaker and our members and a guest at no cost to them. This is a time we use to get to know each other better and just relax and have a great time being together. Many life-long friendships

have been made here and we look forward to seeing each other. We also get together to build a 4th of July Parade float. Our more artistic members design and direct those of us who aren't as artistic, but can glue or hammer. We have a sponsor that donates money to help with the cost of building the float. In December, we get together for Heritage Day, where we clean up one of Arlington's oldest commentary that is located just across the street from our baseball fields. With the help of city workers, we gather litter, cut vines and rake a lot of leaves. After we are finished cleaning up, we cook hamburgers and hot dogs for all those who have helped.

We also have fellowship with other Optimist clubs in our area. We have a very special relationship with the Fort Worth Optimist Club. This past year we had our 29th Annual Baseball Classic, where each club picks two teams from their Bronco, Mustang and Pinto divisions to play each other. The Pinto teams just play exhibition games, while the other two divisions play a 4 day tournament with the winner taking the coveted trophy. We alternate the location of play each year between Ft. Worth and Arlington. This strengthens the bond of friendship between the two clubs with a little friendly rivalry. It also helps raise money for each club by increasing the sales in the concession stands during that week. Our club raised almost \$1000 in one night of sales this past tournament. We also have helped the Arlington Noon Optimist Club by picking up and delivery donated food to their basketball tournament and by helping at ticket being sold at the door.

We have two major projects that we are currently involved in. We are trying to team up with the University of Texas at Arlington in developing a new building to accommodate our growing needs. The University wants to use this as a senior project for a team of students that would come from the Civil Engineering Department, the Architecture Department and the Department of Urban Civil Public Affairs. They also want to develop the plans at no or little cost to our club.

One of our members is looking into getting local construction companies and lumber companies to donate material and labor. Because of our association with USA Football, we have been chosen to be a pilot program for the NFL/USA Football Heads-Up Program. This program helps with concussion awareness and prevention for youth sports organizations. This is at no charge to our club or our members. This will be beneficial for the safety of the children in our tackle program. This also brings a high visibility to our program not only here in Arlington, but around the nation.

But with all the free publicity and community support, we still need funds to support the programs that we offer. Although the registration fees are charged for our sports programs, they barely pay for the programs themselves much less our other programs. We still have to rely on fund raisers to support the day to day running of our organization, as well as the many other programs we offer. In the past, we have sponsored a rodeo tournament, a golden glove boxing tournament and we have even had a carnival with rides. We have sold Christmas trees, chocolate candy bars and raffle tickets for a classic truck. We currently use stock shares as our current fundraiser. Stock shares are similar to a raffle. With a donation of \$1/ticket, you have a chance of winning a gift card of \$500 for first place, \$300 for second place, \$200 for third place in a drawing. The stock shares also come with a buy one entrée and get one free coupon from Spring Creek, who is a major supporter of our club. Spring Creek allows us to do this to help increase the sales of the stock shares. We have several people buy the stock shares for the coupon itself. Spring Creek also offers the top selling team a season pass for each player and a team party for the coaches and the players at their restaurant. This is our primary fundraising method, which bring in the bulk of the funds needed to run our programs.

We also rely on sponsorships to help with funding. We provide banners for every sponsor over \$250 and display them on our sports fields during the season. We have sponsors from local businesses, restaurants and private individuals. Our chairperson goes out into the community to different business asking if they would like to be a sponsor. We have several sponsors that come back every year, and we build on these each year. This past baseball season we had over 6 major sponsors at levels \$500 or above. We had more in sponsorship this year than in any past years.

We are currently looking into grants as another way to fund programs. We are writing grant proposals to send to the Texas Rangers and the Dallas Cowboys. They are offering grants to local sports organizations for improvement of fields and equipment purchases. This is something new and we have only tried a few times before, but something we are activity researching at this time.

I think the most successful clubs have the same qualities: communication, community support, member involvement and remembering our main objects. We have to remember to actively communicate not only with our members, but our community as well. We also need to utilize our members' strengths and talents and remember that we are all volunteers. But foremost, everything we do is for the best interest of the children in our programs and in the community. We may not always agree on how or what that is, but we respect each other's opinion and we don't take rejection or "no" personally. We are here for the same purpose, to "bring out the best in kids!"