

Optimist International White Paper Summit 2013

Stephenville Optimist Club

Stephenville, Texas

When new members are inducted into the Stephenville Optimist Club, members remind them in unison that they have joined the club known as the “movers and shakers.” Since being chartered in 1966, the club has been the home for community, business, and academic leaders, and has become a powerful supporter and advocate for the youth of Stephenville. From 28 charter members to an average membership now of around 120 (including 3 of the original members), the club has been able to grow and remain strong for a long period of time.

MEMBERSHIP

There are several factors to explain the club’s long and successful history, and they will be described briefly in this paper. But the overarching reason for the success of the club can be attributed to the club’s reputation in Stephenville. The Optimist Club is known as a tireless supporter of the youth of the community. From Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, to school programs and trips, sports teams and parks, track meets and scholarships, the Stephenville Optimist Club name can be seen all over town. But even more than that, the impact can be felt. Playground equipment at parks and schools bear the name and logo of the club, and as a result, children grow up here knowing that the Optimist Club cares for them.

That reputation has enabled the club to attract and retain a solid membership, both in terms of quantity and quality. The club averages a membership of around 120. Membership has been as high as 150, but attrition and economic factors brought the number back to the average recently. The membership is a good blend of young and old, new and long-time participants. Almost every month sees at least one new member inducted into the club.

Existing members are fairly intentional about inviting prospective members to the club, often catching new residents as soon as they arrive in town. Because the club is known for so many good things, as well as being a good opportunity to network and get connected in town, many of these prospective members decide to join. While there is no organized plan related to recruiting new members, one thing that we have done over the past several years that seems to be working is allowing members to bring guests for free to check out the club during the summer months. In addition to giving the guests the chance to see the club

meeting first hand, it helps us to keep a few more participants in the weekly meetings while many members are out on vacation.

Weekly club meetings are held at lunch on Wednesday and are limited to one hour. Each week offers the opportunity for club members to catch up with one another, as well as to find out about upcoming events in the club and the area. Most weeks there is a program, often presented by one of the groups supported by the club, and the final week of each month is dedicated to recognizing high school and junior high students of the month.

The expectations of membership have changed somewhat over the last few years. The club does fewer activities that involve direct interaction with youth than before, but still provides a high level of financial support for activities. There are so many more options for the youth to be involved in that the club has had to make the decision to end some activities and change some others to accommodate the changes in the community. At the same time, many members with young children are trying to juggle all of the demands of their own families with finding time to serve others. The club has shown a willingness to tackle these questions head on when they arise, which has enabled it to continue to thrive, even if that looks a little different than it did in the past.

LEADERSHIP

Much of that success is due to the quality of leadership that the club enjoys every year. A serious effort is made to recruit high quality board members and officers each year. The board is made up of members who are leaders outside of the club as well. The current board is made up of business leaders, attorneys, non-profit leaders, and civic leaders. And those who end up serving as officers spend a total of six years in leadership positions, moving from a two-year board term into two years as a vice president, a year as president, and then a year as past president. The continuity and experience this provides for the leadership of the club is invaluable. In addition, a number of members have served on the board on multiple occasions.

The leadership is in place for a few months before taking office. This allows for committees to be staffed and prepared for the tasks in the coming year. And new board members are invited to the meeting right before taking office so that they can see how the meetings are conducted. Board meetings are run with a specific agenda and allow for input and interaction from everyone present in order to make sound decisions for the good of the club, but more importantly to maximize the impact on the youth of the community.

STEWARDSHIP

The other real strength of the Stephenville Optimist Club is in the area of finances. The founding members were told by a representative from OI that the number one reason clubs

fail was financial. The leadership of the club has taken that charge seriously and has continually worked to raise funds and to be good stewards of the funds entrusted to the club. The budgets for the club and the foundation are carefully built and approved well before the new fiscal year begins. And members know that they are responsible for their meals whether they attend or not. This has allowed the club to create a bit of a cushion on the operational side of the budget.

And perhaps the most visible success of the club is in the area of fund-raising. After trying a few other ideas, the club began an annual auction in 1973. That auction raised \$5000. The 2013 auction raised \$50,000. Over the years, the club has raised more than \$1,000,000 to go toward youth projects. All monies raised through the auction stay in the community and are used to fund projects that range from uniforms for t-ball teams to afterschool programs to scout houses and playground equipment.

The auction was the first of its' kind in Stephenville and has enjoyed a great reputation throughout the years. It is held the first Friday of May and is a major event that many look forward to attending and supporting each year. Recently, the club has been working to transition the leadership of the auction to a committee in order to facilitate growth in a changing environment. The First Vice-President is the chairman of the auction the year before becoming club president. The auction receives donations from a large number of businesses and individuals in the area, and many people come out to buy that evening. This tremendous level of support from the community makes the auction both a highly successful fund-raiser and a very fun event year after year.

Each year, the board decides on a major project to support with auction proceeds, in addition to the ongoing programs supported each year in the budget. Last year, the club partnered with the local soccer association to install an irrigation system at the soccer complex. In previous years, the project has included playground equipment and shade structures for parks, a scout house, and sound equipment for school gyms. This year, the board is working on developing a project with one of the local elementary campuses.

Support for the auction continues to be strong because the money is used in very practical and visible ways to support the youth of Stephenville. At the same time, the club is being very intentional about the way the auction is run each year to make sure that it stays viable as a fund-raising vehicle to sustain the level of activity and programming for which the club is known.

Three words can be used to sum up what has made the Stephenville Optimist Club so successful for almost fifty years. Those words are Membership, Leadership, and Stewardship. The club has been able to recruit and retain both a solid membership base, both in terms of quantity and quality. The club has been fortunate to have capable and

committed leadership over the years. And the club has been fortunate to raise substantial funds, which the leadership has worked hard to use responsibly and wisely.

As the community and the world change, the club has had to face the impact of those changes on membership numbers and activity, programs that can be supported, and funds that can be raised. And the leadership of the club discusses those things regularly. Yet, in the face of those challenges, this year's auction was the best ever, new members are joining regularly, and new leaders are emerging. The Stephenville Optimist Club has a tremendous history, and signs point to an equally bright future.