

The story behind “Darts for Dreams”

I’m often asked how Darts for Dreams got started. So, I’ll tell you here. Now, it might turn into a long story, so be patient.

It was during the 2003-2004 and 2004-2005 dart season that the Greater Trenton Dart League (GTDL) had lost several long time players to various diseases. It was also September 30th, 2004 that my father passed away from Pancreatic Cancer.

I don’t remember the exact date, but I recall sitting at McManimon’s Pub in Trenton sometime in 2005 – maybe planning the end of season picnic, maybe not, with Bill Cobb, Mike Dillon, Tony Kenny and maybe some others thinking about a way to ‘give something back’. We tossed some ideas around and one of the large Cancer charities came up. I was actually against it – I work in the pharmaceutical industry, and at that time, the money going into research would have an impact in a decade, maybe two. We kept searching for something with a more immediate impact, a more local impact.

It soon turned into early 2006. I was working with a local charity to find out how to run an event. I’d call and get no return call, try again, nothing. I kept thinking – “We want to raise money for you, and you won’t even call me back?” So, I kept looking and found Make-A-Wish New Jersey (MAWNJ). They had an office in Union and one in Cherry Hill. I knew little about them, but, they returned my calls and I received a fax at the office the very next day. Now, MAWNJ is territorial, meaning each of the 60 or so US chapters works in their region. They are also very protective of their name, brand, and

trademark. I signed the paperwork acknowledging what we could and couldn't do, and off we went.

We pinged some people we knew, including Jim 'Pops' Williams who owned a few bars in the area and was connected with the Conduit Music Club. We were able to get Saturday afternoon, May 13th, 2006, the day before Mother's Day. We had no clue what to do next. We figured we'd mimic the event that used to be at Tir na nOg in the past, but hadn't happened in at least five years – "The 100 dart shootout."

We collected some prizes, maybe 20 or so, mostly donated by players in the GTDL. We collected a few sponsor checks, including a considerable one from our own Conrad Daniels and his RE/Max franchise. On that day, there was a band and they brought about 25 fans. We had about 30 dart players that year, including Jim Widmayer, then from Staten Island, who I had played against in the Island Wide Dart League for a few years and was friends with John Daddio, who I played with at the Poet's Inn in Matawan, NJ previously. We had three dartboards. Players paid \$5 and threw 100 darts, adding up their score. I don't recall what we did for prizes. We also did a few little 8 person brackets on a board for \$5, with the winner getting \$20 and MAWNJ getting the other \$20. The first place winners that year were Jim Widmayer at 3220 points and Mary Jo Chesney with 2084.

Starting that first year, Bill Cobb and Tom Hoffer were there to setup and break down the boards, and Kim Cobb sat at the desk collecting money when people arrived. They have been by my side year in, year out, without question. If they're in town, they are there.

All said and done, the first year we raised \$5,769! Could we do more?

We sure could. Year after year, we increased the amount. \$8,800, \$12,100, \$19,100 and \$21,000 the next few years. During those years,

we moved over to VFW 3525, then Arbeiter Hall and back to VFW 3525. Each year, we got more sponsors, more players involved with soliciting donations, people attending. We then started our "Big Raffle", selling \$5 tickets with prizes like a TV, iPad and Xbox/Playstation. At first, 1000 tickets, then 1200, 1500, 2000 and now, 2500 tickets a year.

In 2011, our 6th year, we moved to Cook Athletic Association, our current home. The VFW was no longer big enough. We had moved on to six dartboards, then eight. Over time, we acquired even more and can stand up fourteen if needed, plus the upstairs room has four more. Generally, we setup ten for the event and have seating for about eighty people. Cook AA also has an outdoor area, so when the weather is nice, people hang outside and enjoy the weather.

We also moved around the calendar, at various dates in April, worrying about other events and tournaments. Eventually, we settled into our home of the last Saturday in April, and have been there for nine years, with 2020 and 2021, the Covid years moving to August.

In 2012, our 7th year, we raised just over \$21,000 and put our total at \$106,000! Utter amazement that we could wrangle enough donations, prizes, players, sponsors to raise that much money.

Around this time, we really started to get a following. The leagues in Philadelphia starting showing up, buying tickets, playing darts, and being a large part of the event. There were years they rented a van or bus. Cook would often do a Karaoke show afterwards, and while we stop playing darts around 6 or 7 PM, the bar is often packed until closing. Our attendance grew, to around 100 attendees each year, with 2018 and 2019 at 123 and 146 respectively!

Now, back to our totals. In 2014 and 2015, \$28 and \$33 thousand. 2016 and 2017, about \$50 thousand each. 2019, over \$71 thousand.

Then, Covid hit. This is where our following really showed. We added some online features – thank you John Meade, our GTDL Webmaster!!! We leveraged dart leagues and online forums globally to get donations and sell tickets. In 2020, we still raised almost \$74 thousand! WHAT!!!! In 2021, it was more difficult to collect donations and find sponsors, but we pulled off a hybrid event and still managed \$53 thousand, then in 2022, back on track, over \$83 thousand!

Our total is now over \$635,000. We've sponsored about 65 wishes for kids facing critical illnesses. Almost all of those are right here in Mercer County, NJ, where our league is.

Some other tidbits. Starting with year 3 or 4, we started having a Wish family attend the event. They're given as much time as they want to share their experience. What does MAWNJ mean to them? What was their wish? How are they doing? What was the impact? Now remember when I said the wishes are almost all local? - Every year, without failure, the family that speaks knows some players in the room. The kids go to school together, they shop at the same stores, or they own a store where we shop, something. It's an unbelievable connection. We find that hearing their stories not only "connects the dots" for our players, but it gives the family an outlet. I sense we are as grateful to hear their stories as they are to tell them.

In 2010, we also changed the format to 51 darts to speed things up and get more people playing. We started to give out hourly prizes for the highest scoring Male, Female and GTDL players. We added a Youth and Team category to get more people involved. We've worked with Charlie over at J & V Trophies, then Betsy at Main Street Awards who graciously donate the event trophies year after year. We also work

with Bruce and Sue Roeloffs at Crown Trophy and Apparel, who provide event T-Shirts for sale and our sponsors. Since 2020, we've worked with David Garfinkel at Dirty Jersey Darts designing dart jerseys for sale – with a percentage of each going back to the event as a prize package.

We started to print an ad-book. 2023, we are stopping that, in lieu of a pamphlet style to save time/energy and costs associated to it.

We've had up to 275 sponsor companies some years, and up to 300 donations. We average about 200 to 225 sponsors. They range from local businesses to the global dart community. We solicit directly, we have players solicit, and we have friends of the league, like Mark Whited over at Bullseye Dart Supply, who connects our event with his vendors. There aren't enough thanks to any and all of our sponsors. I talk to people at various events, they hear I run this event and literally, throw prizes at me to use.

So here we are in 2023. I was saying to someone, \$635,000 – who'd have ever thought that? And what's next? Four more good years and a Million Dollars is in range. A Million Freakin' Dollars!

It would also be a huge oversight to ignore my family, friends and wife. My Mom and Sister have run the scorer's desk for years. My wife Cindy runs the register year in and year out. My other Sister, Niece and Nephew have been there to help. My friends in the GTDL volunteer their time to make sure things run smoothly. My co-workers who donate so generously, and the matching gifts from my employer and others too. It all adds up.

There are no more words – THANK YOU ALL!!! Let's keep it going.

Gary

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