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COVER STORY

By M.G. Angulo

Katy Elks Sweethearts' Special Hearts for Special Children

There is a camp in Ottine, Texas where more than 300 children who come from different backgrounds, livelihoods and cultures learn the same vital lesson: Having a difference doesn't make a difference.

For 29 years, the Texas Elks – a branch of the Elks, one of the largest and most active fraternal organizations in the world – have sponsored the Texas Elks Camp that provides traditional camp activities from music, sports, bowling and art to indoor rock climbing and swimming for Texas special needs children from seven years old to 15 years old. But more than this, the children who attend this camp find solace, inspiration, encouragement and achievement through camp counselors and the featured activities.

This year, funds are being raised for a trip to Sea World for the campers the coming summer, and each Friday, a graduation ceremony will be held where the camp counselors bestow upon the campers a special award for their achievements during camp.

Photo by Hallie Keller.

Tammy Iund.

"For the campers and their families, this is an experience that some only dream of," said Tammy Iund with the Katy Elks Lodge No. 2628. The camp hosts seven three-week sessions each summer, and the children attend camp free of charge, because the camp is 100 percent supported by funds raised by a strategy called the Sweetheart Program, which is implemented at each of the Texas Elks lodges around the state.

Fundraising for Children in Need

The Sweetheart Program is a two-pronged effort: It raises funds for the Texas Elks Camp, as well as the Texas Elks Grants, which also benefit special needs children. While the camp instills an empowering environment, the Texas Elks Grant program provides funding for medical equipment, procedures and the like. The families who need assistance complete the grant application, and it is submitted to the nearest lodge for review.

"Last year, the Katy Lodge provided over $6,000 in grants, and this year, we will provide over $7,700," said Iund. "Throughout the state of Texas, the Texas Elks Grant program will provide over $300,000 in assistance to children in need."

And this assistance is all because of the Sweetheart Program, Iund stressed. "The focus of the Sweetheart Program is 100 percent on special needs children," said Iund, who was crowned the 2015-2016 State Sweetheart by the Texas Elks Association. Iund, along with all of the Elks lodges in the Gulf Coast District, made the district the highest fundraising one last year with a net of more than $119,000 topping all other districts by $40,000. She also broke the per capita record with $61 per capita with her fundraising efforts.

"Each lodge in Texas chooses a person or sometimes a committee to be the Sweetheart for that lodge," Iund explained. "This Sweetheart works hard during the lodge year to raise funds. At the end of the lodge's year, the lodge Sweetheart turns in monies raised at District. The Sweetheart who raises the most money is crowned District

Sweetheart and goes on to the state convention to represent the district and lodge to compete for Texas Elks State Sweetheart."

To date, the Katy Lodge has held the State Sweetheart title more than any lodge since 1979, and nine State Sweethearts hail from the Katy Lodge. Iund, who said she has been involved with the Katy Lodge since she was 18, following in her mother's footsteps, said it takes "a lot of work by a lot of people" to earn the title of State Sweetheart.

"A Sweetheart operates best with a support system, and we have just that in Katy," Iund said. "We call it the Sweetheart Committee. This is a close group of friends who will do whatever it takes to raise funds and awareness for the program. Without this group of friends, I could have never been crowned State Sweetheart."

Debbie Tharp, Sarah Garcia, Tammy Iund and Cherie Guillory worked the Katy Elks booth at the 2015 Katy Rice Harvest Festival.

While she isn't this year's Sweetheart, Iund said she cannot imagine a time when she won't be involved with the program. "Once a Sweetheart, always a Sweetheart," she said.

Ann Powell's Sweetheart Plans

The current Katy Elks Lodge Sweetheart is Ann Powell, who, like Iund, said being a sweetheart is in her blood. "My mother was the Lodge Sweetheart one year, so I guess it runs in the family. As a Sweetheart, we get much more out of it than the kids. There is nothing more gratifying than knowing you have helped improve the life of a child."

Powell has hit the ground running with her fundraising efforts, having already held the Lip Sync Show in September and planning for the 2nd Annual Sweetheart Dinner set for Thursday, February 11th – the largest of the Katy Lodge's Sweetheart Program fundraisers.

Sweethearts also host a myriad of dinners, drawings and fun events like a prior carnival night where volunteers took pies to the face for donations. "As we often say in the lodge, 'It's for the kids,'" Powell said. "My objective would be, as I am sure all Sweethearts in the state of Texas, to raise the most money I can to support this wonderful program."

In addition to the February dinner, Powell is pushing the Red Pig Program to reach her goal of surpassing last year's record. "We have lots of red pig banks that we fill with coins," Powell explained. "There are a lot of businesses that allow us to place them in their business, as well as a lot of lodge members who fill them at home." Powell said the community's support is vital to the Sweetheart Program's success and hopes that Sweetheart functions will help spread the word about Katy Elks and the Sweetheart Program.

Photo by Hallie Keller.

Ann Powell.

Donna Powell, a past State Sweetheart, with daughter Ann Powell.

"The Katy Elks Lodge and all Elks Lodges across Texas are a great place to work on behalf of the many charities the Elks support," Iund said. "While working hard, you make lifelong friends. The smiles you see at camp graduation or the thank you notes from families who receive grants make it so worthwhile. The friends you make are like the cherry on top of the cake. It is a gift and blessing to be able to be involved in such a program."

For more information about the Katy Elks Lodge No. 2628, call 281-391-2763 or visit www.katyelks.org. For more information about the Texas Elks Camp, visit www.texaselkscamp.org.

2nd Annual Sweetheart Dinner and Auction

Founded February 16, 1868 in New York, the Elks, a 100 percent volunteer organization, has given away more than $3.5 billion to charitable, welfare, educational and veterans programs through its Scholarship, Veteran and Sweetheart programs since 1878. With 2,100 lodges nationwide operating under the motto "Elks Care, Elks Share," the Elks have award an estimated $3.3 million in college scholarships a year.

The Katy Elks Lodge No. 2628 is doing its part in that contribution by hosting its 2nd Annual Sweetheart Dinner and Auction on February 11th at 6 pm at Beckendorff Farms Historic Event Venue at 28533 Morton Road in Katy.

The biggest fundraiser for the Lodge's Sweetheart Program, the event will feature a dinner, as well as a silent and live auction with Glenn Beckendorff as the auctioneer. Former Katy Mayor Don Elder, Jr. will serve as the evening's emcee.

"This event is a big event for us," said current Katy Elks Lodge Sweetheart Ann Powell. "For $25, you will receive a wonderful dinner and be entertained by both a live and silent auction. Other fundraising is occurring all the time," she added. "We are constantly holding dinners and raffles and will be having activities during the Super Bowl as well."

Call 281-391-2763 for more details.