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01/01/2007

In the world of charity fundraising, bigger is usually better. The higher the cost for a seat at a fundraising dinner, the more money the charity gets from its benefactors.

While situations like this can translate into big tallies from relatively small events, the high price tag means only a small sliver of the population can participate.

For two local nightclub impresarios, this situation didn't feel right in the post-Katrina New Orleans landscape, so they began helping raise money on their own terms by catering to a demographic largely ignored by charities — their own.

"A lot of charity dinners cost \$1,000 a plate," said Republic New Orleans managing partner Robert LeBlanc. "That's just not within a 20-something to 30-something's range."

All charity fundraisers at Republic hover around the \$100 range, LeBlanc said, making them easily accessible to people living on a budget who still want to give back to the community.

LeBlanc, 29, and his business partner Luis Espinel, 37, opened Republic three months after Hurricane Katrina decimated the city, intending to create a multifaceted nightspot that embraced the city's natural character.

Both were keenly aware of the importance of giving back in a time when most of their clientele had just begun the struggle to rebuild lives shattered by Katrina.

"We felt it was important to justify opening a music venue in New Orleans with all that the area has been through," LeBlanc said. "We decided to couple the venue with charity events. Some of our cover charges are as low as \$10, but it all goes to charity."

So far, about \$270,000 has been raised at Republic-sponsored events, with proceeds going to charities such as the American Cancer Society, the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation and the March of Dimes.

New Orleans Saints players Deuce McAllister, Mike McKenzie and Hollis Thomas

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Louisiana State University basketball forward Glen "Big Baby" Davis, left, joins Republic managing partner Robert LeBlanc at ESPN sportscaster Kenny Smith's Aim High fundraiser at the Republic. (Photo courtesy Skipper Bond)



are among those who recently have chosen Republic as a venue for their charitable efforts.

McAllister's Catch

22 Foundation and McKenzie's 34 Ways Foundation both benefited from events held at Republic, while Thomas held a toy drive for Children's Hospital after the Dec. 17 Saints vs. Redskins game.

An event featuring ESPN analyst and former NBA star Kenny Smith and retired great Charles Barkley have also taken place at Republic.

Smith has raised close to \$3 million for Gulf Coast restoration efforts through his many charitable efforts, while Barkley and many standout Saints players continue their dedication to the New Orleans area, LeBlanc said.

"We try to couple pretty big weekends in New Orleans with charity events," he said. "We had an event after the Saints and Hornets home openers. We pick big, excitable weekends and try to provide enjoyable, entertaining events with all the money going to charity."

Republic will close for two and a half weeks at the start of the new year for some minor repair work, but live music, an active social scene and charitable events will return in February in time for Mardi Gras, making it easy for revelers to give back while having a good time, LeBlanc said.

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