

## **Ballet donors step up**

### ***Snow Queen's tiara (Look familiar?) draws big sponsor***

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**Written by Lauren Bishop**

Cincinnati Ballet board of trustees co-president Rhonda Sheakley vividly recalls watching the 30-month construction of the 41-story Great American Tower at Queen City Square, which opened in January, and its crowning glory: a distinctive arch inspired by Princess Diana's tiara.

The ballet was constantly on Sheakley's brain. Now in her second two-year term as board co-president, Sheakley was part of a task force of business and community leaders charged with raising \$2 million for a completely overhauled "Nutcracker" with all new sets, costumes and choreography. The hope was that the Cincinnati Ballet's first new version of "The Nutcracker" in 10 years – a production that represents about 50 percent of the ballet's earned annual income – would revive lagging ticket sales.

So when Sheakley saw the tower going up, inspiration struck.

"I thought to myself, my gosh, this is unbelievable," she said.

"This crown, this iconic symbol of what Cincinnati is going to be, has got to be the crown of the new Snow Queen."

Sheakley, an experienced fundraiser with a marketing background that included helping to launch Polo men's cologne for Ralph Lauren in 1980, called Great American Insurance Chairman and CEO Carl H. Lindner III, a personal friend, to ask whether he was interested in sponsoring the new Nutcracker.

In return, the ballet would commission a crown for the Snow Queen that would look like the top of the tower. Great American agreed to a \$150,000 sponsorship of the snow scene, and the Snow Queen got her crown.

That's just one of the inventive ways the Cincinnati Ballet has funded its new "Nutcracker," which premieres Thursday at the Aronoff Center for the Arts and runs through Christmas Eve.

Nearly every part of the new production is sponsored, and audiences will see exactly how in the programs, which list detailed sponsor credits. Companies, foundations and individuals from around the region sponsored show curtains, entire scenes and characters ranging from the Mouse King and the Sugar Plum Fairy to dancing cupcakes and bumblebees. Banners in the lobby of the Aronoff will thank companies, foundations and individuals who gave anywhere from \$5,000 to more than \$600,000 (title sponsor Frisch's).

The ballet also has 300 souvenir tiaras to sell for \$25 each and 750 limited-edition nutcrackers for \$50 each.

"This is the first time that our sponsors have been recognized in this way, and they will be associated with their scene or character for as long as this version of 'The Nutcracker' is produced by Cincinnati Ballet – 12 to 15 years," said Liz Taylor Borntrager, the ballet's institutional giving manager.

"That was definitely part of the allure of becoming a sponsor."

After a year's delay caused by the slow economy, ballet staff in 2009 started actively fundraising from corporations and foundations and had assembled a New Nutcracker Task Force by August 2010. The strategy was to target specific donors with specific sponsorships in mind, rather than launch a massive telephone, mail or email campaign.

The task force originally identified nearly 100 companies as prospective partners or sponsors and narrowed down the list to 60, more than twice the number it had targeted in past years.

Sheakley's primary responsibility was to seek out individual donations. She said she applied the lessons she has learned in her three decades of fundraising: Have a good product, make a connection for a potential donor, and make sure you ask the right person and make sure they have the means to donate.

And the ballet discovered that its product was a good one.

"There's nothing like going to corporations and saying, 'The Nutcracker,'" said Victoria Morgan, the ballet's artistic director and CEO and choreographer of the new version.

"People get it. They want to be a part of it."

The chance to be a part of a new version of the classic ballet appealed to many donors, some of whom made their first contributions to the ballet. Those included Great American Insurance Group, the Anonymous Fund of the Greater Cincinnati Foundation and Thomas and Mary Ellen Cody.

The ballet received about \$500,000 in first-time gifts both large and small for the “Nutcracker,” a quarter of the total capital campaign donations, Borntreger said.

“Our family and our businesses have always enjoyed the opportunity to help enrich our community through the arts,” Carl H. Lindner III said in a statement. “As a sponsor of the New Nutcracker, we are excited about the new energy this spectacular production brings to a family tradition and timeless classic.

“And as an added bonus ... what a beautiful design for the Snow Queen’s tiara.”

Another first-time major Nutcracker donor was the Robert H. Reakirt Foundation, PNC Bank Trustee, and PNC, which made a \$170,000 contribution to sponsor the PNC Bank Land of Sweets. (The PNC Foundation and Robert H. Reakirt Foundation have been long-time supporters of Cincinnati Ballet.)

Other donors have made their biggest contributions to the ballet to date. They include the Sheakley group of business-services companies, headed by Rhonda Sheakley’s husband, Larry (sponsors of the show curtain); the James J. and Joan Gardner Foundation (Waltz of the Flowers Scene); the Klosterman family (Magical Drosselmeyer); the TenderLand Foundation (Sugar Plum Fairy); Western & Southern Financial Group; and the Gannett Foundation (media sponsor).

Not all sponsorships came in the form of big checks. Chef Jean-Robert de Cavel’s sponsorship of the chef character in the opening kitchen scene (called Blanche’s Kitchen, after the late mother of Frisch’s CEO Craig Maier) provides the ballet with fine dining at his Downtown restaurant, Jean-Robert’s Table.

De Cavel, who has taken his 7-year-old daughter to see the “Nutcracker,” said he wanted to contribute to “such a beautiful tradition in Cincinnati.”

Some audience members might be surprised to see that the ballet is recognizing its “Nutcracker” sponsors to an extent that they may be more accustomed to seeing in sports stadiums. Others could view the new production as over-commercialized.

But Sheakley disagrees. She sees the sponsor recognition as a tribute to those who have helped keep the Cincinnati Ballet and its “Nutcracker” in Cincinnati, while some arts organizations are struggling financially.

“For us to be able to have something like this within our own city is such a proud honor and tradition,” she said.

“The only way that this would have happened is through the generosity of the foundations, corporations and the individuals that raised \$2 million to do this.”

“Frisch’s Presents The (New) Nutcracker” premieres at 7:30 p.m. Thursday at Aronoff Center for the Arts, 650 Walnut St., Downtown and includes a dozen more performances, the last at 1 p.m. Dec. 24.

Tickets are \$40-\$90.

513-621-5282,

cballet.org.

## **Major Nutcracker sponsors**

### **\$100,000-\$600,000+**

Frisch’s

Robert H. Reakirt Foundation, PNC Bank Trustee, and PNC

Great American Insurance Group

### **\$50,000-\$100,000**

Sheakley

Anonymous Fund of the Greater Cincinnati Foundation

Eleanora C. U. Alms Trust, Fifth Third Bank Trustee

James J. & Joan A. Gardner Family Foundation

Sue & Bill Friedlander

Gannett Foundation

The Kroger Company Foundation

Doris M. & Charles B. Levinson Fund

The Louise Taft Semple Foundation

### **\$25,000+**

The Corbett Foundation

The Thomas J. Emery Memorial

The Greater Cincinnati Foundation

Procter & Gamble

Rosemary & Mark Schlachter

### **\$15,000+**

The Brown Family

Bruce M. Halpryn & Chas W. Riebe

Dr. & Mrs. Henry J. Heimlich

The Klosterman Family

Mr. & Mrs. Larry McGruder

Moe & Jack Rouse

Theodore L. Schwartz & Minette Hoffheimer

Northlich

The Sutphin Family Foundation

TenderLand Foundation

Mr. & Mrs. Michael D. Valentine

### **\$10,000+**

Thomas & Mary Ellen Cody

Dinsmore & Shohl LLP

Frost Brown Todd LLC

Gary & Linda Greenberg

Carol & Robert Olson

Jack J. Smith Jr. Charitable Trust, PNC Bank, N.A. and James S. Wachs, Co-Trustees

Western & Southern Financial Group

Anonymous

**\$5,000+**

Karen & Christopher Bowman

Mr. Nigel A. Vinecombe

Ronna & Dr. Jim Willis