

Group has donated \$15,000, looks to improve on that



COURESY OF ERICA NANNINI

Tucson Charity Bridge Club Founder Ruth Houkom, standing, with Patti Schadow, left, Harriet Kronman and Patty Everts at Streams in the Desert Lutheran Church.

If your resolutions for the new year include improving your overall fitness, Ruth Houkom has a suggestion that could boost your brainpower while helping local charities: Join the Tucson Charity Bridge Club.

"Bridge keeps your mind going. I think that is part of why we have so many older people in the group: We are all trying to stay sharp," said Houkom, who founded the club to make a difference in the community while playing the challenging game of duplicate bridge.

The Tucson Charity Bridge Club, which will celebrate its first anniversary as a nonprofit recreational club next week, has donated \$15,340 to more than 20 local charities since its inception two years ago.

Beneficiaries have ranged from health-care groups, such as the University of Arizona Arthritis Center and St. Elizabeth's Health Center; to small nonprofits, such as Gabriel's Angels, which provides pet therapy to at-risk children, and CASA Support Council of Pima County, which provides support to volunteer court appointed special advocates.

Charities are nominated and put to a vote by the club membership, which has grown from six to 18 tables and more than 100 active members. Membership is achieved by playing 10 times in one of two weekly games: 5 p.m. Mondays at Ventana Charity Bridge Games at The Lodge at Ventana Canyon Golf and Racquet Club, or 12:30 p.m. Thursdays at Streams in the Desert Lutheran Church.

The games cater to Non Life Master players who have attained fewer than 500 Masterpoints from the American Contract Bridge League.

In addition, Mike's Play and Learn Charity Bridge Games at 1 p.m. on Fridays at Streams in the Desert offer beginners a chance to learn the game while raising money - 30 percent of proceeds go to the charity chosen each month by the Tucson Charity Bridge Club.

Houkom said members appreciate the opportunity to support their favorite charities and to feel more involved and connected to the community. They have also paid tribute to fellow members through donations made to organizations such as the Southern Arizona Veterans Administration Health Care System.

"We like charities that are small where we think we make a difference, but we have had members who have had rheumatoid arthritis and another member who started hospice at the Veterans Administration, so it made a whole bunch of sense to give to the (UA) Arthritis Center and the VA," Houkom said.

"There are so many different charities that do so many wonderful things, and it is so important to support them," said Houkom, who has been in Tucson since 1999 and began playing bridge almost five years ago.

After playing with a local bridge club, Houkom was moved to start a club dedicated to charities when she realized that proceeds from regular bridge games could make a significant impact in the community.

Until recently half of the proceeds from table fees went to charities, while the remainder paid nominal facility rental fees and for food and other expenses.

The group's Anniversary Celebration on Thursday marks the payoff of debt, which will enable the club to funnel even more funds into the community.

"I feel that those of us who have more need to give what we can," Houkom said. "It makes retirement more worthwhile, and besides, it feels good."

If you go

- What: Tucson Charity Bridge Club Anniversary Celebration. Festivities include a buffet lunch and celebration along with 24 to 27 boards of bridge.
- When: 11:45 a.m. Thursday.
- Where: Streams in the Desert Lutheran Church, 5360 E. Pima St.
- Cost: \$5 per person per game
- Reservations: Space is limited; reservations are required and can be made by going to www.bridgewebs.com/tucsoncharity online.

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