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Brenengens honored for philanthropic activities

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Don and Cheryl Brenengen have been named Outstanding Volunteer Fundraisers by the Upper Mississippi Valley Chapter of the Association of Fundraising Professionals.

The Brenengens received the award Nov. 14 at the National Philanthropy Day event at the La Crosse Center.

The AFP is an international organization representing 28,000 fundraisers in more than 190 chapters throughout the world.

Before the Brenengens were honored Robin Tanke, chapter president, said, "Our country faces numerous challenges and uncertainties, but we take heart in the extraordinary generosity of people everywhere. National Philanthropy Day provides an opportunity to recognize the individuals and organizations that give of themselves to make our communities and our world a little better every day."

Tanke said the Brenengens were nominated for their work in West Salem and in La Crosse. "This is a couple that really demonstrates the true meaning of giving and philanthropy," she said.

"Their work in spearheading the fundraising of the West Salem Boys & Girls Club is probably the latest and greatest thing they've done and their work to bring the club into being was the primary reason they were chosen for the award," Tanke said.

Neither Cheryl or Don were all that enthusiastic when they were told in April that they had been nominated and then chosen by the AFP to receive the award at the November banquet.

"At first we said 'no,'" Cheryl said. "We thought there had to be somebody more deserving than us — plus we are private people."

After talking it over, however, they decided it might be a good way to kill a couple of birds with one stone.

"We finally agreed because we could personally thank the community for supporting us, plus it was a great way to keep the Boys & Girls Club in the forefront," Cheryl said.

Don gives Cheryl much of the credit for their accomplishments. "She's been the real force behind all of this. She just drags me to things, but it's been great," he said.

As to why they volunteer so much of their time, Don had this to say: "We do what we do because it's the right thing to do. We're all citizens of this community. If you can do something that helps your block, your village or your co-worker, then you should go ahead and do it."

Both agree they get plenty of satisfaction from their volunteer efforts.

"It's kind of like that prayer by St. Francis about how in giving we receive," Cheryl said. "I don't care who you are, that's true. Even giving something small to someone who has less is so worthwhile and so rewarding."

The Brenengens are eager to share credit for the success of the Boys & Girls Club project in West Salem. "We were only as effective as the team we worked with and we were fortunate that the people we worked with in the village were so good," Cheryl said.

Still, she admitted that the project was one of the more stressful things they've ever done. As treasurer, her duties included a lot of day-to-day demands, plus she and Don were involved with the design and renovation of the existing building, the writing of grants and composing and mailing out solicitation letters.

"I think it's the only thing Don and I have ever done where we lost as much sleep as when we bought our first dealership," Cheryl recalled.

A partial list of all the things the Brenengens have been involved in would include establishment of the Coulee Region Humane Society, planting trees at the high school, the bike trail to Vet's Park, a Bike Safety program, and the donation of land along the La Crosse River in Sparta for hiking and walking trails.

With the current economic situation, it's a tough climate for giving, but it doesn't seem likely the Brenengens will be cutting back on their charitable efforts.

"I really like what a professional fundraiser once told me," recalls Cheryl. "He said 'We don't need to give until it hurts — we just need to give until it feels good.'"

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Don and Cheryl Brenengen are shown here at the awards ceremony for the Upper Mississippi Valley Chapter of the Association of Fundraising Professionals. The couple were named the region's Outstanding Volunteer Fundraisers. Contributed photo