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Personal experience drives people to pursue philanthropy

Premium content from South Florida Business Journal by Jeff Zbar

Eric Lazarus, in the yellow shirt, hosts poker tournaments at the Seminole Hard Rock Casino to benefit Andra's Hand, the autism foundation he and his wife founded in 2008.

Eric Lazarus led some 75 people into The Poker Room at the Seminole Hard Rock Casino this month, but he wasn't there just to play cards. He was there to support a cause close to his family's life.



Lazarus, VP of sales and marketing with Lazarus Manufacturing, a Medley-based textile provider to the hospitality industry, launched the event as a fundraiser for Andra's Hand, a local autism foundation he and his wife, Deborah, founded in 2008.

The group “adopts” and provides support to area families who have children – like the Lazarus’ son, Matthew, 15 – with autism. Money raised provides holiday gifts and other support. Named for Eric’s mother, who was killed along with his brother, Avraham, in a car crash several years ago, Andra’s Hand has raised more than \$80,000, said Lazarus, the foundation’s chairman.

“Many families with autistic children have nothing,” he said. “Autism is a very expensive disorder. Care is not covered by insurance. There’s no government assistance. My parents were very influential in helping out monetarily. We felt if she did for us, we should do for others.”

Across the philanthropic landscape, the big organizations garner the lion’s share of attention and charitable giving. Yet, a host of individuals personally touched by illness or circumstance have launched their own groups or supported those large causes in significant ways.

On Nov. 7, Lazarus hosted the poker tournament. This holiday season, [Deborah Lazarus](#) will arrive at the Baudhuin Preschool at [Nova Southeastern University](#) to deliver gifts to the adopted

families, where some have her listed as “Santa Claus” in their cellphone speed dial, her husband said.

Last year, [Jorge Luis Lopez](#), founding partner of with [Jorge Luis Lopez](#) Law Firm, helped raise \$375,000 as gala chair of the 2011 American Cancer Society White Out Cancer Gala. He joined the cause in honor of his mother, a breast cancer survivor, and his wife’s grandmother, who died of the disease at 49. Today, Lopez is on the ACS state board.

[Andy Hall](#), founding partner of trial law firm Hall, Lamb and Hall, was born in a basement in Nazi-occupied Europe. Seeking to support community education programs, he served on the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts’ Light/The Holocaust & Humanity Project, and in July he was appointed to a two-year term as chairman of the Greater Miami Jewish Federation Holocaust Memorial Committee.

‘Strength in numbers’

When [Paul Kaplan](#) and his wife, Michele, welcomed attendees to the 5K Trail Run and Trick or Treat Family Run Walk at the Virginia Key bike trail on Nov. 3, it was only the latest trek on their path with Fragile X syndrome, an inherited genetic condition that causes intellectual disability. Their journey started when their son, Matthew, was diagnosed with Fragile X at about 13 months old.

Creating events, whether a walk or a fishing tournament, or hosting the national conference this past summer, brings “strength in numbers,” Kaplan said. And with numbers has come about \$400,000 since launching in 2007 – and awareness.

“We can easily ask that our partners write a check for \$10,000 to support an organization,” said Kaplan, whose company, KW Property Management and Consulting, matches employee contributions, dollar for dollar. “But it’s about awareness, getting 650 people to talk about it at their dinner table.”

[Howard Talenfeld](#) had several reasons in 2002 to found Florida’s Children First, now a leading advocacy group that protects the state’s at-risk youth. It could be the years he spent defending Florida Health and Rehabilitative Services in major class action lawsuits regarding the foster children, developmentally disabled and mentally ill it served.

Or it could be his younger sister Bess, who – as a special needs child, and now an adult – helped teach Talenfeld from an early age the importance of championing the rights of and support for these “fragile populations.”

“Growing up, working very closely with Bess from when she was a child, I later discovered I had the opportunity to work with and fight for the lives of those in need,” said Talenfeld, president and chairman of Florida’s Children First. “What drove me was knowing there are so many people in Florida who are like Bess. Our lives can be so much more useful fighting for these folks than just fighting about money.”

So today Talenfeld fights. In his professional practice as a shareholder with Fort Lauderdale law firm Colodny, Fass, Talenfeld, Karlinsky, Abate and Webb, he litigates to protect the rights of at-risk groups. And he rallies for the cause as an active and vocal advocate for at-risk youth.

When he launched Florida's Children First, few attorneys took on the cause of at-risk kids. Now, the group helps recruit and train attorneys statewide looking to help kids facing dependency and disability cases. The organization also works with the state Legislature, executive branch and courts to help reform the system, he said. Its fundraisers and annual awards recognize Florida's leading advocates and celebrate young adults who have grown up in foster care and gone on to successful lives. The organization raises more than \$500,000 a year to support its mission to protect at-risk youth. Its membership provides thousands of hours in pro bono case support annually, Talenfeld said.

"I went on a mission to find lawyers who would fight for these children," he said. "When I started, there were almost none. Today, there are hundreds of attorneys fighting for children and on our advisory board. Hopefully, before I retire, I can say 'thousands.'"