

NAPLES

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Local Love



IN THE CHAIR

SHELLY AND RALPH STAYER
TAKE PHILANTHROPY TO
NEW FRONTIERS

TICKET TO RIDE

A TRAVEL INDUSTRY
VETERAN DISCUSSES HER
FAMILY'S LEGACY BRAND

BACKING THE RIGHT HORSE

THE UPSHOT OF OWNING A KENTUCKY
DERBY LONG SHOT

HEARTS

for Charity

BY Jane E. ENOS
Photography by
MICHELLE TRICCA





RALPH AND SHELLY STAYER HAVE ESTABLISHED THEMSELVES AS PROMINENT BENEFACTORS IN NAPLES AND FAR BEYOND, SETTING A HIGH BAR FOR PHILANTHROPIC WORK AND EVENT CHAIRING

Hair: Sandra Cespedes
 Makeup: Carly for Duality Artistry
 Photography assistants: Daniel Andrus,
 Hannah Finman, Riley Brannan
 Sand sculpture: Mitch Guerrero, Mark
 Mangia, The Forever Sand Castle
 Florals: 50Fifty Creative

As generous as our coastal town is, it's hard to top Ralph and Shelly Stayer's philanthropic involvement, whether it's bestowing—as Ralph phrases it—time, talent, or treasure.

While the couple—who are from Wisconsin and built and co-own Johnsonville Foods—have worked collectively on philanthropic projects, it was Shelly who first dove into the deep end of Naples altruism upon their move to Southwest Florida in 2010. Wasting little time, she volunteered to chair for The Shelter for Abused Women & Children's Mending Broken Hearts with Hope luncheon in 2012.

A highly creative individual, Shelly helped infuse many exciting and swish elements into the event, including table centerpieces featuring Hermès scarves in multiple colors. Of course, these were made available for purchase, with 100 percent of proceeds benefiting The Shelter—a next-level luxuriant touch even for Naples. Shelly also wanted to increase attendance for the event, expanding this to approximately 900 persons. With this attendance uptick came additional parking challenges and considerations. As a remedy, she conceived of a shuttle system (called Shuttle for the Shelter) to convey attendees to the event's location at The Ritz-Carlton, Naples.

In addition to chairing this luncheon, “she and Ralph resurrected



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: SHELLY LOOKS OUT AT THE GULF OF MEXICO; SHELLY AND RALPH AT THE NAPLES WINTER WINE FESTIVAL, WHICH THEY CO-CHAIR IN 2024; THE ENTRANCE OF THE 2017 AMERICAN CANCER SOCIETY BUCKET LIST BASH; RALPH ADDRESSES ATTENDEES AT THE NAPLES WINTER WINE FESTIVAL; ANDREA BOCELLI HUGS SHELLY AT THE BUCKET LIST BASH.



COURTESY OF SHELLY STAYER

the Gentlemen Against Domestic Violence (GADV) men's event with a tailgate theme at Old Collier Golf Club," explains Linda Oberhaus, CEO for The Shelter for Abused Women & Children. "Ralph has attended every men's event since, and Johnsonville continues to be a strong supporter of the men's event and the GADV."

And this wasn't the end of Shelly's work with The Shelter. In fact, with Ralph by her side, she made a \$3 million lead gift for the organization's expansion in Immokalee, helping to fund what is known today as the Shelly Stayer Shelter, which opened in 2020. "That's been a wonderful thing," relates Ralph, who says philanthropies that support females and children are closest to his heart. "Many women, some who have children, just don't have a place to go."

Oberhaus adds, "Shelly's \$3 mil-

lion lead gift launched the campaign to build a 21,000-square-foot, 60-bed shelter on five acres [in Immokalee]; the Shelter would not be where it is today without her passion and commitment."

Making a Difference, Differently

While they always support each other, it's worth noting that Ralph and Shelly have distinct approaches when it comes to charity. "Our philanthropic work usually isn't joint," says Shelly. "Yes, we work side by side at times, but often, we have disparate thoughts on philanthropy."

Ralph relays his approach to giving is simple, citing three factors. "First, I aim to focus on the areas with the greatest need and where I can make the greatest impact," he says. "I also look at an organization's outcomes versus inputs; I want to see hard



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—SHELLY STAYER



SHELLY IS INVOLVED IN BUSINESS OPERATIONS AT JOHNSONVILLE, WHERE SHE CHAIRS THE COMPANY'S BOARD AND WORKS AS CHIEF BRAND OFFICER.



RALPH IS A CIGAR AFICIONADO AND PREFERS LIGHTING 1971 MONTECRISTOS.

facts, numbers, and sound strategies. God has blessed us, and it's my responsibility to make certain resources are put to the best use." Last, Ralph says before he donates his time or makes a financial contribution, he ensures this will be used pragmatically. "It's important to change lives; I want to alter the arc of a person's life for the better," he says. "We try to do this within Johnsonville, and I try to do this in the charities with which I involve myself."

When it comes to Shelly's humanitarianism, she relies heavily upon her spirituality to guide her. "I don't worry about it too much," she says. "God guides me and tells me where to get involved and where to help financially."

In the Stayer household, most chairing of events has been done by Shelly, though the couple combined brains and brawn last year as co-chairs for the 2024 Naples Winter Wine Festival. An annual event usually held in January, the festival is one of the largest wine auctions in the world and benefits the Naples Children & Education Foundation (NCEF), a grant-making organization that has aided

350,000 children through its investment in child advocacy, early learning, educational programs, health care, and other areas.

Last year, with Ralph and Shelly at the helm, the event broke records, raising more than \$33 million, an \$8 million increase from the year before. "Naples Winter Wine Festival's template is incredible," explains Shelly. "Truly, it's unmatched anywhere else in the world. We added only sprinkles of change. It's a 12-month job, and we had the help of an extraordinary team."

Valerie Boyd, a founding trustee for the festival along with her husband, Jeff Gargiulo,

notes the conviction that Shelly and Ralph brought as co-chairs. "Their confidence was a force," she relays. "They were so focused and present, always daring to add elements of greatness wherever they could."

One shift the Stayers wanted to make was expanding auction lots well beyond wine-based packages in consideration of those who might not drink wine—or drink at all.

"Ralph and Shelly brought in a new energy and excitement," says Lisa Juliano, senior vice president, Naples Winter Wine Festival and Event Production. "This included creative ideas about auction lots, some of which tested the

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limits of extreme travel, including to locations such as Dubai and Vietnam, as well as an over-the-top trip to Switzerland that incorporated a scenic journey upon the Glacier Express.” However, the pièce de résistance consisted of a seven-night Mediterranean voyage aboard the 312-foot *Whisper* (previously named *Kismet*), the largest superyacht ever to be auctioned. The winning bid? A stunning \$2.7 million.

For Ralph, agreeing to co-chair the Naples Winter Wine Festival had much to do with NCEF’s capabilities and its established track record of excellence. “I’m a big fan of NCEF,” says Ralph, who serves on the organization’s board of directors. “It’s made such a huge difference in this community, helping to save kids and create productive citizens.”

The Sound of Success

Even after co-chairing an event like the record-smashing 2024 auction that raised the lion’s share of \$33 million dollars in one afternoon, Shelly relates that one of her most memorable moments was bringing Andrea Bocelli to Naples as part of the American Cancer Society’s Buck List Bash, an event she chaired in 2017.

“Others had tried to bring [Bocelli] to Naples for performances before but, because of his contractual obligations elsewhere, were unable,” states Shelly. “I wanted him to sing at this event. Many people thought he would be making an appearance and join us for the dinner but not actually sing. They doubted, and I even started to doubt myself some; however, I kept plugging along with my duties as chair.”

To her relief, the celebrated tenor performed and even called Shelly—whose birthday was on the day of the event—upon stage, celebrating her years with a song and a hug. “It was such a relief when he started performing,” explains Shelly. “There were about 600 people in the crowd, many of whom were able to meet and take pictures with him. It was a special evening and one of my biggest accomplishments to date.”

In addition to those mentioned, Shelly has successfully chaired several other prominent events for local nonprofits, including those for Artis—Naples (2012), the Golisano Children’s Museum of Naples (2017), and Naples Botanical Garden (2023).

For Naples Botanical Garden’s Hats in the Garden event, she injected some extra excitement. “For the program, we went completely to video-based messages instead of speakers, I served as MC instead of a media personality, and we created a nighttime vibe by adding side panels to the large tent holding guests,” says Shelly. “Two female DJs

were also added to mix things up, spinning tunes while guests enjoyed their lunch.” Another highlight was a fashion show featuring looks from iconic Oscar de la Renta, made possible in part through the help of Shelly’s good friend Marissa Hartington, founder of Marissa Collections.

“No job was too small for Shelly,” says Rhea Merrill, director of development for Naples Botanical Garden. “She engaged in ground-level strategy and saw each detail through to completion; the culmination was a record-breaking year, raising more than \$2.65 million.”

Pulling off these over-the-top social extravaganzas takes time and ingenuity, as well as a talented team dedicated to the event’s concept or theme. Two people Shelly praises are event planner Milda Vaivada and Matthew Huddleston, owner of Fifty50 Creative Services. “Without Milda, I could not do these large-scale events,” says Shelly. “She’s critical, as is Matthew. They are the A-team; I won’t chair an event without them.”

And her goals when it comes to leading events? “I always aim to increase the amount raised in prior years,” she says. “I also want to attract a variety of individuals, and this includes introducing fresh faces to the event or cause. I’m all for incorporating new ideas and excitement and making the event—most of all—fun and memorable.”

What Rests Ahead

After more than a decade of soiree success, both Ralph and Shelly decided a respite was in order. Though they are taking a break from event chairing, that’s not to say there will be any sitting still. Shelly is highly involved in Johnsonville—currently chairing the company’s board and serving as chief brand officer, working to grow the business. As for Shelly’s altruism in the future, she says her goal is to aid missing and exploited children, combat human trafficking, and help those struggling with addiction.

Ralph, a voracious reader and published book author, serves on several boards and today enjoys lending his time as a business coach to those calling upon his perspicacity. His recent contributions include providing leadership through a specialized program at NCH, The President’s Forum of Excellence with Ralph Stayer, which recently celebrated its inaugural class.

Whether donating to charities, delving into business-driven matters, or contributing in other ways, one thing is certain: Ralph and Shelly Stayer will always have a chair at the table of something that improves, impacts, or empowers. ◀◀



THE STAYERS HAVE MANY HOBBIES. SHELLY TAKES LENGTHY WALKS EVERY DAY, AND THE COUPLE OFTEN RIDE BIKES. RALPH HAS A MUSICAL SIDE AND HAS PLAYED PIANO FOR 40 YEARS.

