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Nonprofit Turns Generosity Into Giving Through Art

NEW YORK -- Many philanthropists live by the mantra that true patronage is defined by 3 simple words -- investment, sponsorship and support.

Every November, The Chronicle of Philanthropy releases a list of the biggest charitable donors and recipient organizations for the year prior.

In 2006, the top five ranked charitable organizations were given more than \$10 billion in private support (or support from philanthropists and/or corporate sponsorship). America's most generous donor in '06 was Warren Buffet, who pledged more than \$43.5 billion to charitable causes.

Of the listed causes, Arts and Culture came in at the bottom of the receiving totem pole, bringing in a mere \$2.5 billion. But the statistics show that on a year-over-year basis, charitable giving to the arts has been on the upswing.

One nonprofit that is no stranger to the cause is "Portraits of Hope."

Launched in 1995 as the brainchild of Ed and Bernie Massey, "Portraits" is a foundation that offers children and adults from all walks of life a chance to participate in art therapy projects. According to its founders, the program's goal is to promote teamwork and creativity by having participants turn existing structures and objects into art.

The Massey brothers are not exactly newcomers to the world of philanthropy. Bernie developed the educational programs youTHink and Soaring Dreams, and founded the Center for American Studies and Culture. Ed, through his artwork, has developed major public community commentary projects. He also sits on the board of the Los Angeles Children's Museum.

Ed and Bernie have worked with thousands to conduct seven large projects that reach across the country and overseas to Osaka, Japan. Their second project, the "Tower of Hope," was brought to life by about 35,000 volunteers over a 4-year period. Children involved in the project painted brightly-colored panels, which were then applied to a defunct oil structure to create a tower of inspiration.

After the "Tower of Hope" project, the founders say they realized that most of the people they were reaching out to had no background education in art. As a result, Bernie developed an art education program for schools nationwide.

In 2001, after an attack on young children in a school in Osaka, Japan, "Portraits of Hope" expanded overseas to the area. The project was named "For the Future" (or 'melie eh') -- and today continues to educate children and adults in Osaka communities and schools.

At the close of 2007, "Portraits" wrapped its 2nd "Garden in Transit" project in New York City, which coated cabs with children's colorful artwork. This has been the foundation's largest income project to date -- more than \$5 million -- which mostly included donations and a project development program for more than 20,000 children in schools, hospitals and communities.

Sponsorship is extremely important to this foundation due to the "bare bones" budget and independent funding of most of these projects. Ranked 47th on The Chronicle of Philanthropy's most generous donors, Peter S. and Helen Bing (who pledged \$50 million to the causes in 2006) have had a big hand in keeping Portraits running. Some of its other sponsors include Vornado, Hotel Pennsylvania and Mac Tac. Over the years, the foundation has accumulated an estimated donation amount of \$10-12 million.

"Portraits of Hope" is mostly run by volunteers who are recruited through Craigslist, colleges, public officials, religious groups and word of mouth.

Its largest paid staff to date was only 35 people at what the founders describe as the lowest pay scale.

Each year "Portraits of Hope" coordinates four to five small projects around the U.S. According to the founders, the excess panels from "Garden in Transit" will be sent to Argentina and organizations such as FEMA as a continuation to beautify different surroundings.

As for the future, the sky and beyond is the limit -- literally. Ed and Bernie say they would like to begin a program in space.