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Heart Gala's success depends on volunteers

By Scott Spilky, writer for *The Shelby Star*

It's because of dedicated volunteers such as Jim Horn and Eddie Holbrook that this year's fifth annual Cleveland County Heart Gala will be a success.

Saturday night's fund-raiser to benefit the American Heart Association, "Ocean Commotion, Hearts In Motion," is sold out and expected to raise \$135,000.

The men are lifelong friends and longtime residents of Cleveland County who are active volunteers in the community. Together Horn and Holbrook received *The Star's* 2002 Spirit of Freedom Award, which honors people who exemplify the values of the newspaper—integrity, respect for individual freedom, community, self-responsibility and learning.

The two also share another bond that makes their participation in this year's heart gala more meaningful—both have suffered heart attacks and have successfully battled heart disease.

Shannon Kennedy serves as co-chair of the event with Holbrook. Mrs. Kennedy said Holbrook and Horn, who serves on the gala's sponsorship committee with his wife, have been crucial to the success of the event. Mrs. Kennedy said it's because of the involvement of volunteers like Holbrook and Horn that this year's gala will reach its fundraising goal, including the sale of all 420 tickets.

"They are so vested in Cleveland County and making it a better place to live," Mrs. Kennedy said.

"Cardiovascular disease is the number one killer in Cleveland County," Mrs. Kennedy said, noting that heart disease takes the lives of about 40 percent of the area's population.

"I'm a lot more fortunate than a lot of people with heart disease," Holbrook said.

The former basketball coach at Gardner-Webb University and current dean of community relations and development at Cleveland Community College, Holbrook, 64, has recovered from two heart attacks. The first one came in 1985 when Holbrook was in his early 40s.

"I had no history of heart problems and kept myself in pretty good shape," he said.

Horn, 67, a retired U.S. probation officer and former volunteer football coach for Shelby High School, also kept himself in good shape and didn't smoke or drink. But heart problems ran in his family.

“My mom died of a heart attack when she turned 57,” he said.

In 2001, Horn had open-heart surgery and recovered from heart disease. He said the type of research done from money raised at the heart gala “probably saved my life.”

Holbrook said he recovered through excellent care from Dr. Douglas Boyette, a cardiologist at the Shelby branch of The Sanger Clinic, who also successfully treated Horn. Holbrook had a second heart attack in the early 1990s when he ran a sporting goods business with Horn. Holbrook said he was “working around the clock, not taking care of myself.”

He recovered again, but in 1994 suffered a contraction of the heart muscle, which he said was a painful and scary condition that felt like a heart attack. Once again the problem was fixed and today Holbrook is grateful for each day and happy to give back through the heart gala.

“You realize if all the medical research with the heart hadn’t taken place, you might now be here,” he said.

Both men were also there for one another during their respective battles with heart disease. Holbrook said Horn, “was almost like a brother for me after my first attack.”

Later, when Horn was dealing with his own heart problems, Holbrook was there to offer support and advice. Horn said his friend has always been there to help others. “Eddie has always been a leading figure in the community,” he said.

A special aspect of the heart gala is that so many people involved with it have dealt with heart disease on a personal level. “It means a great deal,” Holbrook said.

He said the gala has received a lot of financial support from people like Dr. Boyette and organizations such as the Dover Foundation and First National Bank.

Cleveland Regional Medical Center is sponsoring this year’s gala. Other sponsors include Drs. Boyette, Eusebio and Seen, John Barker Realty, Honda of Shelby, Stuart LeGrand, The Star, Copeland Corporation, Leasing Services, Inc., Universal Manufacturing and Logistics, Inc., and Wal-Mart Distribution Center.

“You can just go on and on,” Holbrook said of the generosity of so many people and organizations in the community.

“People in Shelby and Cleveland County are really benevolent people,” Horn said. “They really give to causes. It’s good to live here. It’s just a giving community.”

Holbrook said that generosity is even more remarkable considering the tough economic times that have hit the region. “We’re still going to top our goal,” he said of the funds that will be raised through the gala and silent auction, “and that says something about the community.”

“It’s a lot of fun we have,” Horn said of the gala. “We have a good band, a good meal and just a lot of fellowship and everybody’s working for a good purpose.”

Mrs. Kennedy said that for Horn and Holbrook, the heart gala means more than a good time. “They see it as not just a fun event, which it is,” she said, “but the event can go beyond that and improve the quality of life in Cleveland County.”

“I’m just happy to be able to be part of it, and maybe my efforts will help somebody else,” Horn said.

“It’s sort of a labor of love,” Holbrook said.