

Tire Business humanitarian winner Jerry Rosenthal is known as a 'go-to guy'

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla.—“Go-to guy.” Three little words that pretty much sum up what the many people touched by Jerry Rosenthal’s philanthropic kindness repeatedly use to describe this wiry bundle of nervous energy.

Got a problem putting a fundraiser together for your organization? Go to Jerry.

Difficulty finding just the right type of function to highlight your group’s goals—and bolster its coffers? Call Jerry.

Need fresh ideas from a tireless, rapid-fire brainstormer? Jerry’s your guy.



Jerry Rosenthal talks with middle school students Davanand Mahabir (left) and Benjamin Logan at a JA center. Photo by Sigmund J. Mikolajczyk

The president of Tire Hut Inc., a single-location retail dealership in Fort Lauderdale—known in south Florida circles as a fine foods and wine aficionado—has parlayed that love into a fund-raising gold mine for countless organizations. But the donations of his time, talents and treasure haven’t come via a cold calculator and ledger book, but with love and compassion for each and every cause he supports.

And that has, for Mr. Rosenthal, garnered him the “2010 Tire Dealer Humanitarian Award,” presented annually for the past 17 years by *Tire Business* to recognize the outstanding charitable activities and public service work of an independent tire dealer or retreader.

Judging for the award is conducted by The Volunteer Center, an affiliate of United Way of Summit County, Ohio. In selecting Mr. Rosenthal as this year’s recipient, the judges noted:

“Jerry has been involved and continues to be involved with many community activities both by way of volunteer and philanthropic support. The variety of support includes, but certainly is not limited to, his many roles and responsibilities with the Junior Achievement of South Florida, the Fort Lauderdale Rotary Club, the Wheelchair Foundation and many others.

“As outlined in the many years of submission criteria, his giving back to the community is vast.

“We feel that Jerry meets the nomination service criteria, thus making the most significant contributions to his community and beyond. We’re pleased to acknowledge and endorse Jerry Rosenthal for the 2010 Tire Dealer Humanitarian Award.”

Mr. Rosenthal received the award Nov. 1 during the tire industry honors event sponsored by the Tire Industry Association during the SEMA Show in Las Vegas. He was presented with a special

medal symbolizing the spirit of giving, and *Tire Business* presented a \$1,000 check in his name to Junior Achievement of South Florida.

A soft spot for JA

While any parent asked to pick a “favorite” child might defer to the biblical wisdom of Solomon, asking Mr. Rosenthal to choose among the organizations that benefit from his philanthropy brings up a similar dilemma. He gives much to many.

But he will admit to having a soft spot in his heart for Junior Achievement (JA), an organization that has been around worldwide since 1919. As one walks the halls of the one-year-old JA center on the grounds of Broward College in Fort Lauderdale, *bon mots* line the walls, with perhaps the most succinct being: “We inspire and prepare young people to succeed in a global economy.”

On a recent visit there by *Tire Business* accompanying Mr. Rosenthal, Melissa Aiello, president and CEO the past 15 years of JA of South Florida, was busy making a pitch to some local business executives, explaining the organization’s mission, playing a video of some kids telling what they do at JA and how it has affected their lives, and soliciting the execs’ support.

JA, according to Ms. Aiello, focuses on financial literacy, teaching kids to live within their means, stay on a budget and learn that earning power is tied to staying in school. “It’s just like school and real life,” she said. “We believe in experiential learning.”

In Broward County it is mandatory that fifth and eighth graders participate in JA, and indeed they learn about “real life” via programs that currently have 18,016 fifth graders participating in “Business Town” and 16,884 eighth graders learning the business ropes in “Finance Park.”

JA is a non-profit organization that provides youngsters with a series of business, economics, free-enterprise and life-skills programs to enhance their education. Each real-world company in Finance Park, for example, signs a five-year support commitment and donates \$35,000 to \$50,000 toward the cost of constructing a store front to match their actual business, like a bank, car rental agency, a TV and radio station or a newspaper.

Participating companies include State Farm Insurance, AT&T, Publix, and AutoNation.

“We teach the free enterprise system here,” Ms. Aiello continued, “and help students face the reality of how not getting an education impacts on their families, community and country.”

All that happens under one roof in a \$12 million building—the largest JA facility in the world—that is still in search of \$4 million to pay it off. And it takes a lot to keep an operation like this humming financially, year after year. It costs about \$50,000 a week to run the place on an annual budget of \$3 million.

That’s where go-to guys like Mr. Rosenthal come in.

“When you have Jerry Rosenthal committed to a task, no one, no one is more intense about getting it done than Jerry. He turns himself inside out,” she told *Tire Business*.

“What has he done? He’s given time, money, counsel, leadership, advocacy.

“He’s been a cheerleader for Junior Achievement for as long as I can remember. He asks us if he can give. That normally doesn’t happen very often. We’ll be begging, and Jerry will say, ‘Do you need this for that? Can I get you this for that?’ He offers to give.

“The downside for Jerry is he gets frustrated that others are not necessarily like that.”

Ms. Aiello added: “Once you get Jerry on the team, he’s like a team. He gives it his all. He’s always the ‘go-to’ guy—and not just here but wherever he helps out.... And he just pours his heart out. I can attest to that with his work with the local Rotary Club.” (Ms. Aiello was the first and only woman president of the downtown Fort Lauderdale Rotary International Club, the oldest in the area—another recipient of Mr. Rosenthal’s charitable works.)

“This (new JA building) was not easy to get done,” she continued. “It takes people to believe in it. Jerry gave me the confidence. He got behind me, and we went through some very hard times together.

“People like Jerry motivate and inspire me, and I get my fuel from him. Jerry is a true friend to me and the organization.”

“Our biggest problem,” Mr. Rosenthal added, “is getting people here to see what we do.”

Over the years he has taken the reins to put on fundraisers including wine-tasting and food-focused events for the benefit of JA which, Ms. Aiello interjected, “is one place where you can have an impact on young people.”

Three weeks after the opening of the new building, she recalled a young boy from a very poor school who was dressed in his best clothes, sitting in a chair while his classmates were up and milling about in Finance Park.

A JA staffer wondered, was anything wrong?

“M’am, you don’t have to worry about me,” he told her. “I’ve been hearing about this place for months and have been waiting to come to it. I think this is what’s going to help me.

“I will not end up out on the street like my brother.”

The boy was in tears. The staff was too.

“There’s a lot of kids who are forgotten, going along under the radar, but are suffering under a lot of situations,” Ms. Aiello said. “We’re for all kids: disadvantaged, gifted. It’s all about reading, writing, arithmetic and relevancy.”

After her presentation to the local executives, Mr. Rosenthal admitted he was choking back tears of his own while watching the children's video. "It just really moved me how this organization touches the lives of so many kids," he said softly.

Synagogue benefits

Kerry Ezrol, an attorney in the Fort Lauderdale firm Goren, Cherof, Doody & Ezrol, belongs with Jerry to the synagogue Ramat Shalom in Plantation, Fla., and has worked with him on various fund-raising projects and events there.

"We've known each other for many years through a variety of connections," he told *Tire Business*.

In 2009 Mr. Ezrol was on the synagogue board and responsible for fund-raising. For their first soiree, he recruited Mr. Rosenthal to create and put on what he dubbed a "signature" event—and during a terrible economic environment in south Florida, not to mention countrywide.

"I was a novice at planning fund-raising events. I'd only been involved in social events," he recalled. "We did an event like they'd never seen before. A lot of it I owed to Jerry. One of his great skills is recruiting people to serve on committees.

"But Jerry focused us on the purpose of the event—as a fundraiser—and he kept us on track."

There were several components to the event, including a silent auction, a cash raffle and 50-50-type raffle.

"Jerry was very instrumental in obtaining a lot of auction items for the silent auction," Mr. Ezrol said. "Previously, and historically, we had done events that generated less than half what we did in our first year with Jerry helping coordinate the event.

"I understand it was the most successful charitable event in the synagogue's history. Because Jerry is such a foodie himself, he helped with the food and wine selections, how to set up the room to maximize people's expenditure of funds."

Mr. Ezrol said when he gets involved in an event, Mr. Rosenthal really gets involved, putting in "150 percent" while trying to motivate others to put in as much time and effort as possible.

"Jerry challenged everyone on the committee to really step up, either with a time commitment, or financial contribution or getting involved.

"That pretty much characterizes Jerry and why he gets involved in events. He really steps up beyond anyone's wildest dreams or imagination and has helped the synagogue put on incredibly successful events."

About 320 families belong to the synagogue, described by Mr. Ezrol as "a small, homey, down-to-earth environment—and I think that's what attracts people to it."

Quietly listening to Mr. Ezrol describe his accomplishments, Mr. Rosenthal finally interjected: “As my wife Heidi says, ‘It’s living the religion, not just practicing it.’”

Keeping music playing

The Symphony of the Americas, based in Pompano Beach, Fla., is considered a “major cultural institution” in south Florida in the Tri-County area of Dade, Broward and South Beach counties. In addition to providing regular musical performances, it also travels to Central America and provides concerts and educational opportunities for children and student musicians in Honduras, Guatemala, Costa Rica and Panama, where James Brooks-Bruzzese, artistic director and conductor of the symphony was born.

Said to be the most recorded conductor in southern Florida, maestro Brooks-Bruzzese and Renee LaBonte, the symphony’s executive director, founded the orchestra about 24 years ago. She also is an occasional pianist with the group.

“I always say, a city without an orchestra is like a human being without a soul,” he said. “You need the arts—whether it’s ballet, opera, a symphony—and you need to integrate them into education programs, which is our second-biggest mission.

“...Jerry gets involved and starts attracting other people and helping with events. People don’t necessarily want to go to the symphony, but they will go to a function to support the arts, education programs, help children and spread wonderful art throughout the community. And that attracts money.

“Because of this, Jerry is very valuable. It’s a non-selfish thing he does. When people like Jerry get involved, their dollar goes a long way.”

“I don’t necessarily physically give them money,” Mr. Rosenthal noted, “but I give them lots of ways to get it.”

“Yes, lots of ways,” the maestro agreed.

What has Mr. Rosenthal’s involvement meant for the symphony?

“His energy level is the first and most wonderful part,” according to Ms. LaBonte. “The other is the spirit of camaraderie and working together for a greater goal.”

Putting a pencil to his fund-raising prowess, she said he has easily helped the symphony raise close to a half-million dollars since becoming involved.

“Because Jerry works for so many different causes and so many different areas of community service in Fort Lauderdale, that says he believes in community, whether it’s the arts, a health-related cause, something that he feels is in great need.

“He will get behind it. And he gets behind it with all his energy. And that energy level carries everybody along with him.”

Ms. LaBonte said that spreading of energy, along with his organizational skills, is “sometimes just as important to someone’s volunteerism. Jerry gets to the bottom line quickly and hurries everyone along in a meeting. It gives us a wonderful, efficient use of our time, and we feel we’ve gotten so much accomplished every time we meet.”

Moments after she pointed out that “there’s always something on his mind—getting ‘outside the box,’ as Jerry likes to put it,” Mr. Rosenthal, who was listening intently, shot out several stream-of-consciousness ideas for an upcoming fund-raising event for the symphony.

“He’s always trying to help,” Ms. LaBonte said in response. “He’s got to be a part of everything he believes in.

“Jerry cares. People are the reason why he’s involved and loves supporting the organizations. He loves networking with and brainstorming with people to create a greater whole in terms of the projects he’s working on. There are many ways to see the elements of his success, not just with the actual event. If we put Jerry in the driver’s seat, it always guarantees success.”

Mr. Rosenthal is a regular organizer and contributor to the “Wines of the World” auction and gourmet dinner fundraisers that benefit the symphony.

“Jerry is a wonderful asset to every organization he chooses to give his time to,” Ms. LaBonte added.

Rotary Club support

Bill Gundlach III, immediate past president of the Fort Lauderdale Rotary Club, has known Mr. Rosenthal a long time and has seen him often spring into action to help the organization in its charitable and community-service works “...through the gifts that he gives—which are the gifts that keep on giving.... Everybody appreciates that Jerry is a member of our club.

“He is a food and wine connoisseur and he is ultimately generous in putting together wonderful food and wine presentations; he does that for many of our programs, especially the wine fundraisers he puts on. He’s incredibly generous.”

Mr. Gundlach, who is president of Safe Food Systems Inc., a food safety consulting company based in the Sunshine State, also sits on the board of the Cub Scouts and has been involved, with Mr. Rosenthal, in scouting since their sons participated. “...The things he would do for his pack and den—it’s what he does, it’s who he is, and is one of the great things about knowing him.

“It’s a privilege to work with Jerry. Not everyone does that in this day and age.

“He gives service above self.”

The list of Mr. Rosenthal's Rotary work is long: a golf tournament that raked in \$3,500 in sponsorship and gifts; he has donated wines for club's Legend's Ball; for its dinner auction he assisted in raising more than \$45,000; for the club's annual car raffle, one year alone he sold \$10,700 worth of tickets. "Jerry outsells every member of the club, every year!" Rotary stated in its nomination form for this year's Humanitarian Award.

One of the many organizations supported by Rotary International is the Wheelchair Foundation, whose mission states: "Saving lives one wheelchair at a time."

The foundation raises money to provide wheelchairs worldwide to persons who can't afford them. It has delivered more than 900,000 wheelchairs to persons in 154 countries—including many in south Florida—and Rotary has raised close to \$3 million throughout the world for the foundation.

Jack Drury, president of the foundation in the Southeast (Florida) Region, said, "Jerry is always ready to jump in and help."

"It's important that every wheelchair gets to the person to whom it's donated," Mr. Rosenthal explained. "What's very unique about the organization is it makes sure the wheelchairs go to the people in need. Every wheelchair that's given out, there's a picture taken on the spot of that person in the chair and sent back to whomever the donor is. Nothing goes to the wrong person."

Mr. Drury displayed some examples—pictures of smiling wheelchair recipients the world over.

"Jerry's a unique person and, unfortunately, there aren't too many of them," he continued. "When he's asked to do something he says yes. It's not, 'I'll have to think about it.' He's involved in a lot of activities, and he's just a good guy to have on your team."

In many cases Rotary acts as a non-governmental organization (NGO) in a country such as Honduras, where the group is currently working to distribute the wheelchairs, which come in five sizes: two for children and three for adults.

"It's very emotional, very emotional," Mr. Drury said. "Quite a bit of tears from the recipients."

What makes Jerry tick

With all the rigors of operating a one-outlet tire dealership—which Mr. Rosenthal admits is more than a full-time job—he somehow still finds time for his many charitable endeavors.

"It's hard to say how much time I give (to all these organizations.) The actual days of the events are full days of work," he said while driving to a noontime Rotary Club meeting. "But creeping up to those, it's a lot of hours. I've just never really calculated them. And I don't care to because you do it because you want to."

Asked to describe himself, he was uncharacteristically at a loss for a moment, then said: "I've learned that to make it in life you have to work hard at it. Every day when you wake up is a

challenge. You can make it a good day or a bad day. I wake up every day with a positive attitude. Does my day change sometimes because of something that happens? Yes. But I do wake up thinking, 'Today I'm going to make a difference.'"

Anyone watching Mr. Rosenthal for a short time would conclude he's a driven person, and he acknowledged as much. "I guess I need tasks every day and try to do better in what I do. I don't get it all done, but I try.

"What makes me tick? I guess the charity work started not because of charity but often times you go to an event because of a friend and you want to be a part of that.... Then I look at something and think I can make it better, I can make a difference. I can help this."

So he's a problem solver?

"I guess," he answered. "But I just do it naturally because that's just the way I am. I'm a very outgoing person because as a salesman you have to be to make it in the tire business."

As the conversation drifted back to his work with Junior Achievement—and the indelible mark it has left on him—Mr. Rosenthal observed: "I'm 53 years old, and when we were at JA around those little kids, I'm shy.

"Those kids are so lucky, so lucky to be able to do that. Think of the entire United States or the world, there are only 23 of those (JA) buildings in the world. How lucky for them. That's how I look at it."

Many of the children who participate in JA don't realize what they have, he added. "Maybe someday, for some of them, it'll click. When they're 25 or whenever, if they're smart. But for some of them it never clicks."

Although he readily admitted his charitable works can have a positive effect on his tire business, Mr. Rosenthal looks at it this way: "The people in the charity world recognize charitable people and do give them business, including myself. I've given business to my Rotary friends because they do Rotary, and if they help out in the community, I'm willing to give them business because they've took time out to give.

"It's definitely a give-and-take relationship.

"I wasn't born with this compassion. I don't know what brought it on. I guess it's my hobby and, honestly, I don't have too many hobbies."

The object of Rotary is "to encourage and foster the ideal of service as a basis of worthy enterprise," he said. During every meeting, members recite the club's mantra—its "Four Way Test" upon which the club's foundation lies:

1. Is it the truth?

2. Is it fair to all concerned?

3. Will it build goodwill and better friendships?

4. Will it be beneficial to all concerned?

“My whole life—and my business—runs on Rotary’s concept and guiding principles, its motto,” Mr. Rosenthal said.

“Those are the foundations of life.”