

Star-Telegram

Eyes on Arlington: The best of 2014 and the biggest plans for 2015

BY FAYE REEDER - SPECIAL TO THE STAR-TELEGRAM

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Here in A-Town we have a treasure trove of charities, nonprofit, education and civic groups that contributed much to make this a great place to live in 2014. What better time than the last day of the year to ask leaders of a few of these organizations to reminisce about the past 12 months and make plans for the year ahead.

We asked them to ponder their considerable accomplishments this past year and, casting modesty aside, choose only one as their organization's Crowning Achievement of 2014. Natch, we also asked their No. 1 New Year's resolution for 2015.

Here's a random sampling of responses:

The Ladies Auxiliary of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Arlington has been producing Arlington's oldest charitable event, the **Cinderella Charity Ball**, for over 50 years. In 2014, (drum roll here) the ball raised an unprecedented \$823,000. This may be the most money raised by any Arlington fundraiser ever.

Auxiliary President **Lou Ann O'Donnell** said all the praise goes to the high school ladies who were 2014 Cinderella candidates.

"Our first and foremost New Year's resolution is always to have another successful Cinderella Ball. This year's number will be hard to beat in 2015, but we have another great group of candidates and I know they will give their all to make it happen," said O'Donnell.

River Legacy Foundation Executive Director **Jill Hill** pointed to the Living Science Center as 2014's linchpin. "We have continued to plant the seeds of environmental stewardship through our growing educational programs that [reached] more than 14,000 kindergarten through eighth-grade students in public and private schools through engaging hands-on field investigations each year since 1996."

Partnering with the General Motors GREEN initiatives, the center added a junior high curriculum teaching the importance of local watersheds.

Ambitious plans for 2015 revolve around strengthening the Living Science Center as a community asset that opens children's minds to the possibility of careers in science and the environment. A partnership with 900lbs of Creative will create a reactive projection exhibit as part of renovation now underway. "Our goal for 2015 is to raise the \$2 million needed to complete all phases of the exciting renovation project for the center," said Hill.

Jeannie Deakyne, president of the **Junior League of Arlington**, said: "JLA's most significant achievement of 2015 is our 15 percent increase in membership, which grew our capacity for community impact, fundraising and leadership development by leaps and bounds.

"Being awarded with the 2014 Association of Junior Leagues International Membership Development Award was the icing on that cake, and was a direct result of engaging our members more effectively through a new member program that makes more sense for women in North Texas, giving our members access to more effective learning opportunities and providing them with more meaningful ways to contribute to the community.

For the year ahead, Deakyne looks forward to more time with her family and to her new role on the AJLI Governance Committee where she can "share our research and outcomes with women across the world looking for ways to create meaningful impact in their communities."

Arlington Arts League President **Catherine Brown** pointed to the scholarship luncheon as 2014's spotlight moment, where \$12,000 in scholarships were presented to fine arts students at UT Arlington, TCC Southeast and to high school seniors in Arlington.

"All of our activities, most importantly our Gala, are aimed at advancing the awareness of the arts in Arlington, and what better way to do this than to give our young people a small boost to reach their artistic goal with a scholarship, Brown said.

Increasing membership and attracting a younger demographic are the driving forces for New Years resolutions for AAL. "We have given our membership a goal to bring a friend and/or a young person to our general meetings and to our gala.

Symphony Arlington manager **Bethany Thomey** said celebrating the 15th anniversary of the symphony highlighted 2014. "Since our inception, we have presented over 200 concerts without a single cutback," Thomey noted.

In the year ahead, Thomey said the symphony resolves "to continue to showcase the highest artistic quality supported by our international artists and guest conductors, ethnically diverse musician roster and bring rarely performed repertoire to Arlington and the surrounding communities."

Arlington YMCA President and CEO **Roberto Aguirre** is proud of the financial support totaling more than \$310,000 that provided 30,000 scholarships granted to YMCA program participants but pointed to an unprecedented number of people enrolled in the Y's summer programs as the year's greatest achievement. "Over 40,448 individuals within our service area were positively affected by our mission and by the services we provide. This is an all-time record going back 58 years, and we are proud of that," Aguirre said.

For 2015, Aguirre said, "My main New Year's resolution is to become the best possible dad to my 8-year-old son. Balancing my professional and personal life is going to be critical in order to fulfill this particular resolution, and it is going to be a top priority."

For the Y, Aguirre said, "The expansion of facilities and services is at the top of the list. I believe it is going to be essential to continue meeting the demand from the citizens of the Arlington-Mansfield area."

The crowning achievement of the **Arlington 4th of July Association** according to outgoing President **June Owens**, was the television coverage of Arlington's parade. "Being aired on network television in all the major markets in the nation put [the parade] and Arlington in the national spotlight," Owens said.

The obvious resolution for the association in 2015, Owens said, is "to make the 50th anniversary parade the most memorable in its long history."

Brian White, executive director of the **Arlington ISD Education Foundation**, said the crowing achievement of 2014 was “raising \$100,000 at our Tailgate Arlington Wild Wild West event.”

“My main New Year’s resolution is to brand our organization and get everyone in the community on board with our mission. As one of the top 10 largest school districts in Texas, we need diverse, broad-based support in order to be successful,” said White who was hired just over six months ago. “I plan on getting to know as many people as I can in Arlington,” he added.

Norman Ussery, executive director at **Theatre Arlington**, heralded a great season of shows with good attendance but was most proud of adding a third elementary school to the musical theater program his staff operates on Title I campuses to enhance student learning skills.

“Thanks to funding by the Texas Commission on the Arts and local donors —principally the Peters Family Trust — we are at Webb, Crow and Speer elementary schools.”

Ussery’s hope for 2015: “To get to know our patrons and donors personally. They are our family.”

Chris Hightower, director of **Arlington Museum of Art**, said the highlight of 2014 was the “Amazing turnout for the Ansel Adams exhibit, including people from every continent.”

In 2015, Hightower said plans are to “continue to build on successes and grow the Arlington Museum of Art into a destination for tourists and a source of pride for the community.”

Arlington Historical Society Director **Geraldine Mills** said the completion of the outside renovations of the Historic Fielder House was 2014’s home run for the organization. For the year ahead, Mills resolves to lead the charge for generating support to tackle interior restoration and renovation of the century old home.

This from **Vicki Niedermayer**, CEO of **Helping Restore Ability**, “Our most significant achievement this year has been the success we’ve seen from our advocacy efforts at the legislative level that are resulting in thousands of people with disabilities now being taken off of the state interest lists, and enrolled into lifesaving services for the first time — many after waiting over 10 years for help.”

“Our New Year’s resolution is to expand our agency’s capability to support those thousands of families reaching out to us for help and be the premier agency to best respond to those needs.”

Arlington Life Shelter Executive Director **Becky Orander** said a story about a homeless man who came to the shelter in 2011 with an addiction and limited work history is a hallmark of the year. “This man was featured in the Community Foundation of Texas annual report as an agency success story because he has changed his life and has now become a financial supporter of the shelter.”

For the year ahead, Orander reflected on the 95,000 meals served this year by 46 local faith communities at an audited value of over \$400,000, and resolves to: “Spend more time with our partner faith communities this year thanking them for their service and educating their new team members.”

Patti Diou, executive director of Arlington’s **Levitt Pavilion**, trumpeted attendance as the most significant accomplishment this year. “More than 127,500 people attended our 63 free concerts.”

“When we look back on the concert year, we don’t just think of the great music and awesome musical artists, we think of the people who have become our Levitt family – people like the Hintons and our air guitar hero, Alan. And the Holpins and Hunter, who took his first steps on our lawn and is now showing his little sister how to be a music fan. There’s cancer survivor Sally, who pursues her photography at our concerts, and the Regalado family, who chose the Levitt as the place to say goodbye to a beloved husband, father and teacher much too soon. And Michele and Louis, who had their first date on our lawn and got married there this summer.”

“Engagements, birthdays, anniversaries, neighborhood gatherings and class reunions, they all have happened on the Levitt lawn. We are honored to be a part of all of them.”

And for a New Year’s Resolution – “Work hard to make 2015 even bigger and better than the one before.”

For me as your Eyes on Arlington reporter, the greatest achievement of the year was to share more stories than ever about Arlington’s social and charitable events. My 2015 resolution is to keep the community informed about new and returning fundraisers and events, and I rely on your input to keep this resolution – so please continue sending your news tips and story ideas to me.

One of my favorite quotes is from journalist and author Hal Borland, who said, “Year’s end is neither an end nor a beginning but a going on, with all the wisdom that experience can instill in us.” Happy New Year everyone!

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