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Two architects with party fever launched event that's raised thousands for charity

As Askew Nixon Ferguson Architects celebrates its 30th anniversary, the firm carries on another tradition started over 20 years ago. When two enterprising architects, Joe Wieronski and Steve Hill, decided they wanted to host a party at the firm, they had little idea they were creating an event that would become a Memphis tradition.

But the idea took hold and the R & B Party, also known as the "Architects Party," was born.

"We just decided it would be fun to have a party to meet new people. As we started planning it, however, we found out how expensive it was and decided we'd have to raise some money," Wieronski says. "We decided, however, we didn't feel right taking money and agreed that if we made any money beyond our expenses, we'd give it to a charity."

Wieronski says everyone knew St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, so they called up the hospital and asked if they could include their name on the invitation and donate any proceeds. St. Jude agreed.

"We made a thousand dollars that first party, and we donated the money," Wieronski says.

Principal partner William Ferguson remembers when Hill and Wieronski first came up with the party idea.

"These were a couple of 24-year-old guys looking for a reason to have a party. We had parties all the time here, but they wanted to have a 'real party,'" Ferguson says.

In fact, rumor has it the party was planned simply to meet women. When asked, Wieronski only laughs.

"That's not entirely true," he says.

Regardless, after the success of the initial party, everyone wanted more.

If the first party was considered a success, the second one far outweighed it. Looking for ways to enlarge and strengthen the event, the firm decided on a theme party, with the second event deemed a beach party.

"The parking lot looked like a beach complete with sand dunes. They had several loads of sand brought in and put a hot tub in the sand dunes. There were palm trees and life guard towers. It was amazing," Ferguson says.

Today, framed collages from each party hang in the firm's kitchen area.

"We've had people meet at the parties and get married here," Wieronski says.

The R & B Party is held twice a year and now attracts several thousand people. But behind all the fun and memories, the philanthropic drive still prevails. Each party raises approximately \$10,000-\$20,000 for a local charity. Past charities include St. Jude, Porter Leath Children's Home, the Make-a-Wish Foundation and the Tennessee Lung Association. The next party will take place on April 29, 2005 and will benefit the International Children's Heart Foundation.

Lee Askew III, a principal and founder of Askew Nixon Ferguson, believes that what drives the R & B parties is no different than the motives for offering their space to the public.

"We have a hidden motive," Askew says. "We want to encourage the arts in Memphis, and we're just trying to act as a catalyst. And we love a party where we have a chance to meet all kinds of people."

Askew Nixon Ferguson opens its doors to the public regularly, inviting groups in for meetings, lectures, weddings, social events and art exhibits. Over 300 local artists have displayed their work at the firm over the years.