

Safari theme helps drum up funds for The Bridge

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Supporters of The Bridge Youth & Family Services knew they weren't in Kansas — er, Palatine — anymore when they had to walk through a safari tent to enter the Hyatt Regency O'Hare ballroom for the agency's annual gala.

Once inside, they found tall safari grasses on every table, and heard Africa tribal music playing in the background. Even the auction items played into the theme. Guests could bid on a luxury walking safari through Kruger National Park in South Africa.

The exotic surroundings served to empower the 335 guests Saturday into something of adventurers, as they bid generously during the night, driving its proceeds to more than \$110,000.

Now in its 41st year, the human service agency provides counseling, mentoring and education to thousands of children and teens and their families each year in Palatine Township.

At the Champagne Safari dinner dance, Bridge board members kicked off a new campaign, called "Building Bridges." They hope to raise \$500,000 to launch new behavioral health services for preschoolers.

The evening featured another special event, as board members surprised executive director Peter Cunneen with a plaque recognizing his 20 years of service.

Cunneen said staying at the agency has been an easy decision. He credited the board members, volunteers and dedicated caregivers on staff with making his job a satisfying one.

He came to The Bridge 20 years ago after working at Little Brothers Friends of the Elderly in Chicago. In coming out to Palatine, Cunneen said he was returning to his strength in working in youth counseling.

Over those years, he has seen many changes, including in the amount of volunteers drawn to the agency's mission, the amount of money raised and the move toward more therapeutic counseling from group support for teens.

"Helping kids has been most of my life," Cunneen says. "I'm an eclectic type of person. I don't do well when I have to do the same thing every day. I love the fact that here there's constant change, and something new every day."

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