

A good reason to PARTY

by Elizabeth Kumru



Molly Dickinson had thrown some big parties before, but never one of this magnitude. And certainly none so righteous.

Dickinson was in charge of preparing the grounds for the 2006 Cattlemen's Ball that was held at Riverside Park – a former church camp – the first Saturday of June. The annual event showcases rural Nebraska, promotes beef in a healthy diet and raises money for cancer research.

The location, a 96-acre peninsula on the Blue River, inspired this year's theme, the "Red, White and Blue River Ball." The picturesque property sits adjacent to the family's Midwest Feeding Company lot just north of Milford, and is owned by Dickinson's in-laws, Bob and Marg Dickinson, who volunteered to host this year's ball.

"This is a perfect location for the ball," said Bob Dickinson. Campers normally inhabit the property, which is managed by Molly Dickinson, and buildings are rented for family and class reunions.

"I can't think of anything better to do than to

use this space to raise money for cancer research," he said.

Everyone is touched in some way by cancer, and the Dickinsons are no different. Cancer claimed Bob Dickinson's grandfather and two of Marg Dickinson's grandparents. Numerous friends are survivors. This year, 1.3 million people will be diagnosed with cancer and 570,000 people will die from the disease, according to the American Cancer Society.

This year's goal, to raise \$350,000, at first appeared daunting, Molly Dickinson said. But, when the party was over, the tents and port-a-potties hauled away and all the money counted, this year's event was more than a success. Those attending the sold-out event matched their big hearts with big donations and raised \$627,500, the second highest amount ever raised in the nine-year history of the event.



At right: Bob and Molly Dickinson go over final details before the tents go up. An aerial view of people lined up for dinner at the Cattlemen's Ball.



UNMC's Eppley Cancer Center received 90 percent, or \$563,250, of the proceeds and the remaining 10 percent stayed in the local area for health care activities.

"Words can't adequately express how grateful we are for the Cattlemen's Ball," said Ken Cowan, M.D., Ph.D., director of the UNMC Eppley Cancer Center.

"What an incredible event. It is just amazing how much work goes into the ball and how many people volunteer their time and talents to make it work. It is one of those events you have to see to believe," he said.

With only 14 months to plan two meals, auctions, displays and entertainment for more than 3,500 guests, it was a task only the bravest of organizers would tackle.

Fortunately for Dickinson, she was born to organize and she had help – 30 committees and 625 volunteers managed various aspects of the event. Most of the volunteers were from the Milford, Seward, Friend and Gretna communities.

"The biggest surprise I had was how people came together to help. It was awesome to see," she said.

Successful events evolve from careful planning, organizing thousands of details and asking the right questions, including:

- Will 3,950 pounds of prime rib for the evening meal and 320 pounds of filet for the noon brunch be enough?
- How long will 11,000 pounds of ice last?
- Where should the 31 port-a-potties and five wash basins be located?
- How many 600-amp transformers are needed to provide power to the booths?
- Will there be anything left in the 73 kegs of beer the day after?

"I tried not to stress out," Dickinson said.

Event co-chairs, Doug and Gail Brand and Ron and Annette Wallman, provided a bedrock of support.

Photos by Elizabeth Kumru and Tom O'Connor. Aerial photo compliments of Cattlemen's Ball-Nebraska.

The Seward couples oversaw the planning of a day filled with such activities as health screenings, art shows, an antique tractor show, a casino, a meadow muffin drop, mechanical bull riding, wine and cheese tasting, a style show, and live and silent auctions.

Auction items ranged from a 12-foot tepee, a custom-built playhouse and a homemade quilt to all-terrain vehicles, a really big manure spreader and 16 cattle embryos.

For the auction and general store, Dickinson herself made 14 children's picnic tables that were uniquely painted by area artists, including two children being treated for cancer at UNMC.

Displays ranged from the historic to ultra-modern. An 18-foot tepee brought an historical frontier ambiance to the ball. Deer hair littered the ground as men in buckskin clothing demonstrated the stages of tanning deer hides. Trains, a working windmill, virtual hunting and different cattle breeds were on display. Guests could even test drive a new tractor.

The day culminated with a hearty meal and headline entertainment provided by contemporary country singer Phil Vassar, a friend of Molly Dickinson, and a dance with the Blackwater Band.

"It's been an unbelievable experience," Dickinson said. *D*



Dr. Ken Cowan with, from left, nurses Dawn Meisinger and Lisa Baker and nurse practitioner Kathleen McConnell. The nursing team performed more than 130 PSA tests on men and screened more than 450 people for skin cancer at the UNMC Eppley Cancer Center screening tent.



The 2007 Cattlemen's Ball of Nebraska will be Saturday, June 2, in Lodgepole, hosted by SandPoint Cattle Company, LLC, the Ray and Mary Alger family and John and Laurie Widdowson.