



## Sheila Stevens: Volleying for Women's Health

This 2008 Good Neighbor Award Winner started with a single tennis tournament, raising \$22,000 for breast cancer treatment and prevention. Her group now raises 10 times that amount in a single year.

By Barbara Ballinger | November 2008

Steel magnolias don't appear just on the silver screen. Sheila Stevens, a native of Albany, Ga., with a sweet Southern lilt, discovered her internal drive, gutsiness, and powers of persuasion when she was issued a passionate directive.

Her Bible study leader urged her group's members: "Get out of your comfort zone. Use your spiritual gifts to help others."

Initially, Stevens was stumped about how she could contribute. "All I know how to do is play tennis," Stevens told the group in 2000.

But it didn't take long for Stevens to begin proving her mettle off the court. She spent a month deciding how to combine her spiritual gifts, which she considered leadership, giving, and empathy, with deep affection for her late mother, whom she wanted to honor. Her mother had died of colon cancer the year before at age 54.

At one of her next Bible study sessions, Stevens shared her plan to organize a tennis tournament.

Over five months of intense work, Stevens organized the first two-day Volley for a Cure women's tennis tournament in Duluth, Ga., outside Atlanta. The May 2001 event included 56 women and raised \$22,000 for the DeKalb Medical Hospital Breast Cancer Research Fund.

"Initially, it was hard for me to ask people for help, but what made it easier was that it wasn't for me but for a greater cause. My mother died of colon cancer, and I thought a related cause that affected a large number of women would be meaningful. Almost every woman knows someone who has had breast cancer," says Stevens, now 42.

Others might have been satisfied with one smash hit. But Stevens found the first effort so fulfilling that she was determined to bring the tournament to other neighborhoods. She wanted all funds to be donated locally. "I wanted to keep [the money raised] in the neighborhoods so

people would feel they could see tangible results," says Stevens, whose volunteer organizing coincided with her burgeoning career as a salesperson at Prudential Georgia Realty in Duluth.

Stevens' skill at pairing the right person with the right task is a major reason for her organization's success. "She sees in individuals what they can best contribute," says board member Kristen Sapp, who writes about the group's activities for a neighborhood newsletter and other local publications.

The organization, which has exceeded its fundraising goals each year, supports a variety of local breast cancer initiatives, from a diagnostic mammography center and mobile mammography van to the purchase of treatment handbooks for patients. As the activities and number of participants expand, funds continue to pour in.

This spring's effort raised a record \$250,000 at ten Atlanta-area sites with 650 women, men, and children competing. In addition to tennis, the diverse events now include golf, running, and walking. This year the organization, which has contributed more than \$1 million to fighting breast cancer since its founding, was renamed The Sport of Giving Inc. to reflect its broadened range of competitions.

Stevens' efforts have filled troubling health care gaps in the community. Gwinnett Medical Center Foundation in Lawrence, Ga., for example, was able to renovate and expand its diagnostic center with funds from The Sport of Giving. "It would have been years before the hospital system could have come up with the money," says Ginger Powell, director of development at the foundation.

Success has propelled Stevens to work even harder. Between January 2007 and May 2008, she volunteered almost 1,500 hours and contributed \$7,000 in personal funds. She's now focused on adding more sports venues, sponsors, a monthly email newsletter, a fashion fundraiser, and information about cancer prevention on the organization's Web site. And she goes forward with grit and grace. "Everybody has a purpose. I'm doing this for my mother, the women it helps, and to fulfill, maybe, why God put me here," she says.

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