



Warwick feeds philanthropic hunger

Singer plays benefactor to host of orgs

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By Lauren Zima

On this season's "The Celebrity Apprentice," Dionne Warwick was competing for the Hunger Project, a global non-profit dedicated to ending world hunger. But while Warwick had taken her charity work to a reality show, it has long been her reality.

Warwick's philanthropic efforts gained national attention in the late '80s when "That's What Friends Are For" hit the charts. The Grammy-winning cover of the Burt Bacharach/Carole Bayer Sager song raised more than \$2.5 million for the American Foundation for AIDS Research.

"I felt we were doing something extraordinary," says singer Gladys Knight, who collaborated with Warwick on the song along with Stevie Wonder and Elton John. "Though it has been over two decades fighting this disease, many like Ms. Dionne Warwick, Sir Elton John, Mr. Stevie Wonder and I are still coming together to try to make a change."

Warwick took on AIDS as a personal cause, starting the Warwick Foundation in 1989 to benefit AIDS patients.

"That song was one of the first real efforts to say, 'We have to pull together and do something about this epidemic,?'" says Barry Dayton, marketing and communications director for the Desert AIDS Project, which in March gave Warwick its Pioneer of Arts and Activism Award for her work fighting the disease. "That song is emblematic of AIDS fundraising."

The award was given to Warwick in part because this year marks the 25th anniversary of "That's What Friends Are For," and in the quarter century, she hasn't slowed down. In 1987, Warwick was named a U.S. Ambassador of Health by the U.S. Public Health Service, and she also serves as a goodwill ambassador to the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization -- hence her work for the Hunger Project.

Tim Holder, director for the Hunger Project-United Kingdom, says he and Warwick worked for 18 months before launching the first World Hunger Day on Jan. 9 in London, a three-hour concert that she hosted.

"What was supposed to be a 20-minute meeting lasted almost four hours," he says of their initial discussions. "She made time to meet. She then followed through every step of the way."

Holder describes Warwick taking red-eye flights around the world and giving weeks of her time to the cause. When Warwick took the stage at the concert, she got a standing ovation.

Such applause isn't foreign to Warwick, who has performed several times for the Starkey Hearing Foundation.

"She gets a standing ovation every time," says Steven Sawalich, associate director of the foundation. Sawalich says over the past four years, Warwick has helped the foundation raise millions for its efforts to give hearing aids to those in need around the world.

And while many of Warwick's efforts are global, she hasn't forgotten her hometown. Last year, she worked with Hewlett-Packard to install products for a new technology lab at the Dionne Warwick Institute in East Orange, N.J. Jim Christensen, director of media relations for HP Personal Systems Group, says it's clear Warwick isn't the type of benefactor who just writes a check.

"The first time I walked the school halls with her, every student and teacher we passed said, 'Good afternoon, Ms. Warwick,' " he says. "She was no stranger."

Christensen says Warwick even helped unpack the computers herself when they arrived.

Andrea Sims, owner of Lion's Share Communications, also witnessed the Warwick Effect when she coordinated the singer's acceptance of an honorary doctorate from the U. of Maryland Eastern Shore last year; an honor for Warwick's contributions to education. "People kept talking about how her songs changed their lives," Sims says. "She spans generations."