

Fundraising WITH A HEART



Written by: Marianne Pienias

Michelle Connors was recently featured in February's Costco magazine for her non-profit organization Rustic Love. For some reason I was compelled to meet Michelle, and I can honestly say that what unfolded throughout our Zoom conversation was so much more than I had bargained for. We soon became kindred spirits talking about life's wonderful surprises.

Michelle had been in the marketing sector for over 20 years and showed no signs of stopping. In fact, she had just accepted a new job in January of 2020. Well, as you may have guessed, as with so many other people, Michelle's life took a sharp turn when the pandemic hit in March. She found herself furloughed from her new job and at home with a houseful of five children who were no longer able to go to school. And that's when the unimaginable started to morph into action.

Michelle quickly took note of the people and organizations in her community who were working tirelessly to help people in need, especially kids and families experiencing food insecurity. She wanted to help, and a seemingly simple idea emerged: Using an old, left-over wooden pallet and a heart template from one of her kid's plastic folders, the first of many heart signs took shape. No one knew then that her kids' backyard art project would flourish into a highly regarded nonprofit.

Michelle and her crew recruited neighborhood kids and families to help make signs. Soon they were making and selling hundreds of hearts. These 12 X 12 heart signs began to sprinkle the yards of Vienna, Virginia. And as



their heart sales grew, so did the heart of the whole community. Many local businesses joined her mission and used her trademarked logo on a variety of products ranging from jewelry to craft beers, all in an effort to ease food insecurity. As an adoptive parent to her Ethiopian son, Michelle's mission to help feed her community was one that was especially close to her heart.

Over 5,000 hearts and \$380,000 later, Michelle admits that her learning

curve keeps evolving every day, ready or not. When I asked Michelle what her biggest challenges are, she replied, "weather and distribution." One thing I love about Michelle is her willingness to learn and seek advice from others. She now has an amazing all-female board, all selflessly sharing the burdens and joys of Rustic Love's rapid growth.

As we know, sometimes success takes a village, so if you are a business owner looking to support a good cause or you are an individual who can help Michelle's organization through a financial donation or even helpful merchandising and distribution tips, Michelle can be contacted through their website:

<https://rusticlove.org/>

Congratulations to Michelle for following her passion and making the world a better place. We know your non-profit organization will be a success because your heart is in the right place (pun intended).

Photo Credits:
Rustic Love (header background & group photo) | Suzie Bauer (headshot)