

CAPITAL STRATEGISTS GROUP

Cutting-edge fundraising strategies help First Tee of Northwest Arkansas make a hole-in-one for area youth BY KARA ISHAM



Some may call the funding strategies of Capital Strategists Group ‘non-traditional.’ But some, like First Tee of Northwest Arkansas executive director Mike Shea, would call them ‘successful.’ Team members for the Georgia-based CSG work with nonprofit organizations around the country to help them become more economically sustainable. They do this by moving beyond traditional fundraising, such as galas or events, to delivering ‘investable outcomes.’

CSG partner Marie Carlson said the group’s process is what makes them different. She said that process is based on a simple fact: the days of nonprofits being funded on purely emotional appeals and special events are over. She believes this is true for any type of nonprofit, including those in the health, education, youth programs, social service and economic development sectors. Carlson said a focus on value proposition, or return on investment, opens up an entirely new set of motivations for people to invest in nonprofits. “Partners are not just writing a check,” Carlson said. “They are choosing to make an investment in the outcomes they feel will have an impact, and the investors are holding the nonprofits accountable to deliver those outcomes.”

CSG first came to Northwest Arkansas a few years ago to teach sustainability classes to nonprofits through the Care Foundation. It was in these classes that CSG connected with the First Tee of Northwest Arkansas and Mike Shea. She said CSG’s approach to funding just made sense. “I liked what they were saying. I liked their approach. It seemed very win-win.”

With the guidance and support of CSG, First Tee of Northwest Arkansas launched a \$1.3 million funding campaign that concludes this month with a celebration ceremony Nov. 4. The strategic initiative, “Invest in Values that Last a Lifetime,” is a three-year plan with the goal of making a positive impact on every participating youth in our area through learning facilities and educational programs that promote character development and life-enhancing values through the game of golf.

Shea said he and the First Tee board members knew they didn’t have the experience to raise more than \$1 million, so they looked to CSG for help. Originally, First Tee had set a goal of a \$5.2 million campaign. But a feasibility study conducted by CSG, where community leaders confidentially gave their opinions about the possible campaign, showed that the public would likely not support such a large campaign. Carlson said the feasibility study really narrowed down the focus and the range for

First Tee’s new fundraising goal. She said First Tee was able to receive the support from local corporations and companies, because the nonprofit listened to their opinions and suggestions. “Feedback from potential investors must be listened to,” Carlson said. “You can’t just adopt the word ‘investor’ instead of ‘donor.’ People see right through that. They must be treated like investors, just like in a major corporation.”

Carlson said that CSG will continue working with First Tee over the next three years as the initiative is carried out. The \$1.3 million (and likely more) will help fund a new First Tee facility on 40 acres in Ward Nail Park in Lowell; fund mobile teaching units that bring portable greens and a driving range to schools, special events and places like the Boys and Girls Clubs; and provide materials and equipment for elementary schools to teach golf as part of physical education classes.

Shea said that he and the board are excited about the success of the campaign, and credit CSG with helping them accomplish the goal professionally and quickly. “They helped us through this. We couldn’t have done it without them, that’s for sure,” Shea said. Carlson said First Tee’s success is not surprising. “When our process is followed, and the value of the outcomes are demonstrated, the end result is always more funding for the organization,” she said. ■



Mike Shea, executive director of First Tee of Northwest Arkansas; CSG partner Marie Carlson; and John Green, president of the First Tee Board of Directors