

Making a Difference

Giving Back

An Interview with Christine O'Reilly-Riordan,
Vice President-Community Relations/Executive Director, Chicago White Sox Charities

EDITORS' NOTE Christine O'Reilly-Riordan begins her 35th season with the White Sox and her third as Vice President of Community Relations/Executive Director of Chicago White Sox Charities after being promoted to the position in February 2015. She also has been instrumental in the creation of the White Sox Volunteer Corps (established in 2009). Most recently, O'Reilly-Riordan received a Smart Cookies Make a Difference award from the Girl Scouts of Chicago and Northwest Indiana. O'Reilly-Riordan graduated from Illinois State University with a degree in education.



Christine O'Reilly-Riordan

ORGANIZATION BRIEF The White Sox recognize and accept the responsibility to serve all Chicagoans in the greater Chicagoland community. Their outreach through Chicago White Sox Charities (whitesoxcharities.org), the team's philanthropic arm, along with the club's year-round community relations efforts, touches the lives of their neighbors in many different ways. In addition to the in-kind support provided by the club, White Sox Charities provides financial and emotional support to hundreds of Chicago-based organizations. With the generous support of White Sox fans, friends, and sponsors, White Sox Charities has donated more than \$27 million since its inception in 1990.

Will you touch on the Chicago White Sox history of giving back and the mission for this organization?

When Eddie (Einhorn) and Jerry (Reinsdorf) bought the team, we didn't have a community relations department. In the 35-plus years that Jerry has owned the team, community relations has become one of the most robust departments of all baseball teams.

He really believes that baseball is a social institution and it's our responsibility to give back. It frames up why we do so much. We're strategic in building the legacy that he has established for us, which is serving as a best practice leader in community outreach for the baseball community and also being involved in the community so we can be flexible and reactionary if we need to be.

In 1991, we looked at the closing of the old ballpark as an opportunity to create seed funding for Chicago White Sox Charities and formalize

the financial support that we had been offering to Chicago's nonprofit community under a 501(c)(3).

We just celebrated 25 years of grant giving last year, and we have donated about \$27 million to the Chicago nonprofit community.

Are you focused on where you can make the most impact or are you covering a broader focus?

Chicago White Sox Charities was founded on the fact that we had supported cancer research and treatment programs directly from the White Sox.

We wanted to make sure that cancer research and treatment was something we would continue to fund, and we do so to this day.

In addition, we try to provide funding to agencies that are providing services to the marginalized members of our community, but this can be difficult because there is so much need.

When White Sox Charities was created, we focused on literacy programs for early childhood. We're now focusing on high school graduation and a post-secondary track with an emphasis on programs that get kids into college, where we can continue to track and support them.

We also support programs that serve children of families who are at risk. These dollars are focused on mental health services for parents, primarily mothers, and their children who have experienced abuse and trauma.

The last issue area that we have chosen to address is health and wellness. We support recreational activities that are focused on the obesity epidemic, particularly in Latino neighborhoods in Chicago.

The bulk of our health and wellness objectives are supported through our urban youth baseball development program. We have a Little League program, the MLB RBI program, and our highly developed travel baseball program, which is the Amateur City Elite program. We're providing in excess of \$500,000 per year to support these.

How important are metrics and do you track impact?

It's critically important. Our funding comes in large part from our fans, sponsors, and friends, so we have to be a good steward. The grant application that the agencies have to submit as part of the vetting process for selecting the grantees requires that the agencies provide detailed information on the measurements they're using.

We are looking for reporting not only on their outputs, but also their outcomes so we can see what impact is being made.

As a baseball organization, even if we can't offer grant support, we can still help by providing in-kind support for fundraising activities, for instance.

How much of a focus is player engagement?

Engaging the players in our outreach is very important and part of the White Sox culture. Players know how committed we are to community support and that we count on their involvement.

How important is it to have a buy-in for this work from the top of the organization?

It's organic at the White Sox. It's who Jerry is and not just what he does. Jerry is present, and employees hear from him. For example, he eats in the lunchroom every day. We have many opportunities within our organization to hear from him, and he always reinforces the value he puts in the work that we're doing.

Time and time again, he talks about how important he feels our urban youth baseball programs are. They often give kids an opportunity to go to college on baseball scholarships. He also feels our Volunteer Corps initiative is important as it engages White Sox fans to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the organization and do community service work on a regular basis. We hear him say those things often. With the culture we have, we always refer to the "White Sox family," and we don't take that lightly.

Is this type of work something you were attracted to early on?

My path to working in baseball was serendipitous. It was a summer job during college. I wanted to teach special education, so I felt inclined toward a service job.

Being able to represent Jerry and our community relations efforts has allowed me to support children and education programs. I'm also involved in supporting families that have complex situations so it's aligned with what I thought I wanted to do.

When I was offered the opportunity to move into the community relations department in 1991, it sounded exciting because Jerry was always talking about it. Since I know how much it means to him and how much he values it, it has been a rewarding job, but also an easy job because we have that support, and we know we're important to the team's greater vision. ●