

Charlotte restaurateur wins national humanitarian award

Harper's Group's Sasser honored by hunger relief agency for two decades of work

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04/15/2015 10:27 AM



Charlotte restaurateur Tom Sasser was named Humanitarian of the Year this week by the national hunger relief organization Share Our Strength, in a ceremony in Washington, D.C.

That was Monday.

He spent Tuesday in N.C. congress people's offices, advocating to feed more hungry kids. Chefs, restaurateurs and volunteers from across the country were gathered for SOS's No Kid Hungry Summit.

He flew back to Charlotte for tonight's Taste of the Nation, the city's 20th such fundraiser, which offers ticketholders tastes from about two dozen Charlotte restaurants, along with drinks, live music and more.

If the night goes as well as Sasser hopes, the effort he has led over two decades will top \$2 million, aimed at ending childhood hunger in America.

"I have a good committee," he hastens to say, "and all these restaurants and sponsors who have been coming for 20 years." His Harper's Restaurant Group has been a key player, as well.

Back in 1996, the first Taste was a mark of the city's restaurant progress.

As Jeff Van Dyke, then president of the restaurant association, said at the time: "Just five, six, seven years ago, you couldn't have gotten 34 restaurants putting out plates without serving the same thing."

Tickets were \$25 – "we underpriced these tickets," Sasser said then, "or let's say, 'It's an amazing value' " – and the event netted about \$60,000. That total nearly doubled the record for a city's first time holding the event. In those days, about 100 cities across the country held them.

"It's still an amazing value," Sasser said Wednesday as organizers rushed to set up a tent in the rain. "There's a Who's Who (of chefs) here tonight."

He's eager to talk about visiting schools getting help from No Kid Hungry to serve breakfasts to more children. "The schools that do it are amazed," he said. "All of a sudden attendance is up, the scores on tests are up, the discipline issues are way down... The outcome is a healthy, lot happier chid who does better in school and will become a better member of society."

The No Kid Hungry program is a comprehensive effort, aimed at teaching families to cook healthy meals and stretch their food budgets; making healthy breakfasts available to more children at school; and increasing access to help during the summers, too. “Most kids (who qualify for free and reduced meal programs), there’s not much of anything at the house. So when school’s out, it’s not good,” said Sasser.