

# Hot Blues, Warm Hearts



The San Diego Blues Festival. Photo by Jon Naugle - Naugle Photography

## By Stacy Jeffress

For Jim and Paige Payne of Springfield, MO, it was not enough that they volunteered at a local drop-in center to feed the hungry; they fervently wanted to raise money for the cause. It seemed natural for them to combine two of their passions to create the [Stomp The Blues Out of Homelessness Festival](#) nine years ago and contribute the proceeds to organizations that help people. "The blues has a connotation that people are living down in the dumps, down on their luck," says Jim Payne. "Through the blues festival, it could maybe provide a way out." In 2018, their event raised \$7,500 for [Women in Need of the Ozarks](#), a nonprofit organization that assists single women with practical needs such as housing payments and utility bills.

Blues music not only heals the soul, it also generates thousands of dollars for charity every year through the festivals we love to attend. There are countless examples of festivals that raise money to fight hunger and homelessness, provide musical instruments and opportunities to kids, and support health-related charities such as organ transplant networks. We shine a spotlight here on just a small sample of the generosity displayed by blues festival promoters and fans for these and other worthy causes.

The [San Diego Blues Festival](#), now in its ninth year, is owned by the [Jacobs & Cushman Food Bank](#), which has been the beneficiary of nearly \$1 million and 12 tons of food since the event's inception. Producer Michael Kinsman credits the festival's success and longevity to the fact that it is owned by a nonprofit organization and the resulting symbiotic relationship

between the event and the food bank's mission to provide nutritious food to people in need. "Our model has allowed us to thrive since our organization got started in 2011," he explains. "It should be a model for how blues festivals can survive in the current climate."

North of the border, the [Calgary International Blues Festival](#) partners with [Alpha House](#), a nonprofit offering several programs for individuals impacted by substance abuse. Alpha House benefits by having a free booth at the event to provide information about their street teams, housing program and detox facility. Festival producer Cindy McLeod has been delighted to observe Alpha House clients become members of the blues family, including one individual who has become security team lead for the festival's late-night venue.

Those of us active with our local blues societies are well aware that a significant strategy for sustaining the blues genre is to match kids up with instruments, provide them with musical education and get them up on the stage. Many festivals designate their proceeds for connecting children to the blues through [Blues in the Schools](#), community arts programs and the development of young artists.

[Blues from the Top](#), a festival produced by the Grand County Blues Society in Winter Park, CO, supports [Blue Star Connection](#) (BSC), a project that brings youth and music together. BSC provides instruments to kids and young adults dealing with cancer and other challenges. Since 2005, BSC has reached over 800 young people and donated instruments to 65 children's hospitals and music therapy programs.

In Indiana, the [Bloomington Blues & Boogie Woogie Piano Festival](#) presents free piano workshops after school, sends



The Mammoth Husky Club Ukulele Kids opened the 23rd Annual Mammoth Festival of Beers & Bluesaplooza. Photo courtesy of the Infinite Music Foundation

guest artists into public schools and gives students free tickets to concerts in the community. This year, the festival is proud to feature a performance by a 14-year-old piano player who attended one of its piano workshops last year.

Several festivals include young artists on the schedule. At the 2018 [Mammoth Festival of Beers & Bluesaplooza](#) in Mammoth Lakes, CA, the [Ukulele Kids](#), all third and fourth graders, opened the festival. The resulting video on YouTube proves that nothing opens a blues festival quite like 12 adorable kids and their teacher, all strumming their four-stringed instruments and singing. The festival's proceeds

support the [Infinite Music Foundation](#), whose goal is to get children thinking musically at a young age so they'll carry that appreciation throughout their lifetimes.

The [Playing with Fire Free Summer Music Festivals](#) series in Omaha, NE, supports the local blues society's [BluesEd](#) Youth Artist Development Program. Jeff Davis, organizer and producer, neatly summed up how important it is to provide performance opportunities for students. "Every Playing with Fire show has been opened by a BluesEd youth band. If you want to have young people play the blues, you need to present opportunities for them to do so."

The Playing with Fire series supports a wide variety of organizations in addition to youth musical education. [Donate Life Nebraska](#) was chosen as a partner specifically as a result of the festival's friendship with Walter Trout, whose life was saved four years ago by the liver transplant he received at the Nebraska Medical Center. Curtis Salgado also had a life-saving liver transplant there in 2006. Thanks to the presence of Donate Life Nebraska's information booth at the festival, countless people have been educated about the intense need, inspiring hundreds of new donors to sign up.

Blues festivals benefit a wide array of worthy causes. They include the Clarksdale (Mississippi) Downtown Development Association, which receives proceeds from the [Juke Joint Festival](#), and the [Killer Blues Headstone Project](#), a beneficiary of the White Lake Blues Festival in Michigan. Steve Salter, founder of the Headstone Project, says that, thanks to the money raised by the festival, 104 headstones have been placed at previously unmarked graves of blues artists. "These people are the architects and creators of the blues, soul and



Donate Life Nebraska Coordinator Lisa Carmichael (lt) with Marie and Walter Trout (ctr, rt) after a Playing with Fire concert. Photo courtesy of Playing with Fire

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Boogie-woogie pianist Daryl Davis teaching a youth workshop at Tri-North Middle School, Bloomington, IN.

Photo by John Jones, courtesy of Bloomington Blues & Boogie Woogie Piano Festival

jazz music we know today," Steve says. "They deserve to be honored and recognized."

In addition to the funds raised, relationships between blues music events and worthy causes create broader awareness on both sides – blues fans learn of the needs in their community, and nonprofit volunteers and recipients experience, first-hand, the power of the blues. "Groups that would otherwise never have been exposed to the music have gotten involved and become fans," explains Eric Larsen, president of the [Chenango Blues Festival](#), which gives various local nonprofits the opportunity to fundraise during the festival. "Music is such a great way to bind communities together, that it just makes sense to widen that circle of benefit whenever and however we can." 🎵

Stacy Jeffress began her freelance writing career in 2006 with the Kansas City Blues Society membership magazine. She gained a writing mentor in 2008 as a result of accosting KBA recipient Don Wilcock in a Memphis elevator during her first IBC, and has now published 100 articles and served as director of the Paxico Blues Festival.

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