

Toyota Celebrates 20 Years Of Charitable Spirit Through Race



Grand Prix Foundation President Rick DuRee visits with 5-year-old Brianna Tomayo, a patient at Miller Children's Hospital. Each year the foundation hosts fundraising events for four core charities, one of which is Miller Children's Hospital. (Photograph by the Business Journal's Thomas McConville)

■ By **TIFFANY RIDER**
Staff Writer

For 20 years, Toyota Motorsports and the Grand Prix Foundation of Long Beach have maintained a charitable spirit surrounding the Toyota Grand Prix of Long Beach by donating funds to local children's hospitals and other charitable groups, as well as making the nonprofit Racing For Kids a major charity of the race.

Each year, the foundation designates four charities to receive funding from its two fundraising events – the Toyota Charity Ball, held on the Friday evening of race weekend, and the Toyota Grand Prix Golf Tournament, held the Monday before the race. The foundation events are staffed by upwards of 200 volunteers.

The charity gala is a silent auction, dinner and dancing,

followed by a live auction. The most prestigious item auctioned off at the gala is the opportunity to ride in next year's Toyota Pro/Celebrity Race. Rick DuRee, the foundation's president, says the racing slot has gone for \$105,000 before, but in most recent years it has gone for about \$75,000. Auctions are also part of the annual golf tournament held at Old Ranch Golf Club in Seal Beach, as well as a raffle and putting contest.

"Since its inception, the Grand Prix Foundation, through its association with Toyota and the Grand Prix Association, has raised and distributed approximately \$2.75 million to local charities," says a proud DuRee. "Ninety cents out of every dollar that we raise goes directly back to charity." The rest of those funds are spent on overhead work, he says, including one part-time employee.

According to DuRee, the four charities that benefit from

the fundraising efforts are Miller Children's Hospital, the Orange County Children's Hospital, Long Beach Area Special Olympics and the Robert E. Leslie Scholarship Program for graduating high school seniors. Additional funds are donated in smaller amounts to some local charities. Last year the foundation donated \$25,000 to each of the children's hospitals.

Though the foundation donates funds directly to the children's hospitals, DuRee says the organization wholeheartedly supports Racing for Kids, through which Toyota makes charitable donations. In fact, Racing for Kids founder, Dr. William Pinsky, is a personal friend of DuRee's.

Pinsky, a pediatric cardiologist, founded the 501(c)3 Racing for Kids in 1990 after realizing his childhood car racing dreams, spawned from years of listening to the Indianapolis 500 on the radio. He raced Formula Fords, which were small open cockpit, open wheel race cars, against 18 year olds with "non sense of mortality or responsibility," he says. Pinsky soon realized that his racing days were over, having a "real job and a real family," but his passion for racing needed a new outlet.

Pinsky developed the cause-related marketing program combining what he says are the two important parts of his life – taking care of sick kids and his passion for motorsports. In 1991, the nonprofit began its relationship with Toyota Motorsports and its Toyota Pro/Celebrity Race, as part of the Toyota Grand Prix of Long Beach. According to Pinsky, the local race remains a key player for the longevity of Racing for Kids. "The events in Long Beach are very important to what we do," Pinsky says. "Toyota has been very generous in partnering with us."

Racing for Kids does its cost of operations based on corporate sponsorship – similar to the way Verizon sponsors Roger Penske's race team – allowing donations from Toyota and the Pro/Celebrity race or from anybody else to go directly to the hospitals.

The central part of the organization is to garner media attention to the needs of children's hospitals by having drivers visit ill children at more than 600 hospitals across North America, Australia and Japan. The drivers give kids autographs, pose for photos and provide Racing for Kids hats, coloring books and other memorabilia.

In Long Beach, celebrity drivers from the Toyota Pro/Celebrity Race visit with the children at Miller Children's Hospital the Thursday before race weekend to help them have a better day. A group of children from the hospital are then brought to the race on Saturday, and Pinsky takes the kids around to meet drivers and get autographs.

According to Toyota National Motorsports Manager Les Unger, the auto company donates \$5,000 to Racing for Kids for each driver in the Toyota Pro/Celebrity Race. With 18 entries this year, Toyota will give \$90,000 to the nonprofit, which, in turn, divides the funds between Miller Children's Hospital and Children's Hospital of Orange County.

Unger says there is always the opportunity for an additional \$5,000 to be donated to Racing for Kids or another designated charity, as Toyota also provides a donation to whomever wins the celebrity portion of the race.

Over the past two decades of this charitable activity, Toyota has donated more than \$1.9 million to various children's hospitals. The Toyota Grand Prix of Long Beach allows the company to continue a charitable relationship with Southern California as "a compassionate and involved member of those communities in which we reside," Unger says, referencing Toyota's U.S. headquarters in Torrance and the company's use of the Port of Long Beach through the years. "Charitable giving is very important to the company, and obviously motorsports is a very important part of our overall marketing and promotion program. We feel that the Toyota Grand Prix of Long Beach is an excellent opportunity for us to take advantage of giving back to the community." ■