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Geri Santos, right, shares a moment with her friend, Angela DeSantis, during the Black and White Masquerade gala to benefit Bring Back the Beach on Saturday night at the Ocean House. They are from Charlestown.

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By MICHAEL SOUZA / Sun Staff Writer | [7 comments](#)

WESTERLY — The Greater Westerly-Pawcatuck Area Chamber of Commerce had been looking for a way to boost “Bring Back the Beach,” a series of fundraisers providing Misquamicut businesses with grants to help them recuperate from Superstorm Sandy.

At the same time, the Ocean House wanted to help those businesses as well as hold an event to brighten a dreary winter.

The timing could not have been better.

The Black and White Masquerade gala held Saturday night was the perfect fit. Based on Truman Capote’s 1966 Black and White Masquerade, known in some circles as the party of the century, the sold-out party of some 500 attendees netted more than \$65,000 in admissions alone.

Celebrants were treated to an open bar, fine cuisine and live music. Activities included live and silent auctions, which featured vacation getaways and other fine gifts worth hundreds if not thousands of dollars.

Sandy caused an estimated \$14 million in damages in Misquamicut. The ball is the fund's primary Bring Back the Beach fundraiser before the 2013 summer season, and the Ocean House was an appropriate setting, right down to the circling spotlights that usually mark a Hollywood premiere.

"We've held functions with a philanthropic element, but not at this scale," said Michelle Wade, director of communication for the Ocean House. "We were extremely fortunate making it through the storm, but when we saw the devastation in Misquamicut, we wanted to do some sort of event. When we learned about Bring Back the Beach, we knew that this is what we were going to do.

"We all depend on the Misquamicut beaches and helping them is important to the community, so we were more than happy to do whatever we could. We're also happy that 100 percent of the proceeds will go toward the Bring Back the Beach fund."

Behind their effort was Watch Hill resident Charles Royce, owner of the Ocean House and other properties in the area. His longtime affiliation with the town set the tone in the Ocean House's undertaking with the chamber of commerce.

"We used to hold these parties years ago at my home," Royce said at the gala, "so we thought it would be a good idea to hold one here. Misquamicut got the worst of the storm, much more than we did. We had to help."

"We weren't here when the storm hit," said his wife Deborah, "but when we saw Misquamicut, it was disturbing."

The masquerade ball was an affair held by the entire community. Local businesses donated food, beer, wine and auction items. As for the Ocean House, it picked up the balance in its entirety.

Usually guests at any party arrive fashionably late, but this ball was the exception — 30 minutes after it began, the hotel was packed. All were dressed exclusively in black and white, and most played along, wearing masks throughout the evening. The party spread across two floors and catered to a variety of people. Some danced the night away, others dined, while some looked for a quiet and cozy corner.

"To see this many people come is wonderful," said Jean Pennacchio, who grew up at her grandfather's house on Breach Drive in Weekapaug. "The house has been in our family since 1959 so we're from the area. We took only minimal damage from the storm. We were lucky. It's good to see everyone come out and support the town."

The force driving the fund has been the Westerly-Pawcatuck chamber under the guidance of Lisa Konicki, its executive director. Not only has the chamber taken the lead, it has taken control of

the entire undertaking. Konicki said \$251,000 in grant money has been collected thus far. The initial goal of \$400,000 is within reach and \$170,000 has already been distributed.

Recuperating from Superstorm Sandy has been the chamber's primary mission since the near-hurricane struck Oct. 30, 2012. According to the R.I. Department of Economic Development, Misquamicut generates \$9.3 million of revenue in the direct area, \$28 million for the region, and generates about 500 jobs. With most businesses incapacitated, getting Atlantic Avenue operational was of primary economic importance.

Needless to say, the chamber has been overwhelmed by the response.

"I am so proud of the community," Konicki said. "Everyone has come together. We started right after the storm. To be four months down the road and still have this momentum says a lot about the people in the area. They are all very giving and compassionate."

No money was used to advertise the event and tickets were not even printed. The entire affair was generated exclusively by social media, and Konicki was proud that such a grandiose event could be held with virtually no expenses by such a small community.

The money is used to assist businesses in the Misquamicut area that are waiting for insurance compensation, or in some cases had no insurance whatsoever. Businesses apply for grants regardless of chamber membership status, and an oversight committee makes awards based on many factors. So far, the chamber has received 30 applications.

"There are a lot of variables. A grant could be based on the cost of the damage, the number of jobs at stake, the amount of insurance, out-of-pocket expenses or the tax revenue," Konicki said.

The nature of the damage runs the gamut. In some cases buildings were totally destroyed; in others, shopkeepers trucked their inventory out of town, losing only display cabinets. Some building owners were prepared by the purchase of property insurance that included possessions, while other shops were uninsured.

Thanks to those who attended, the ball was sure to bring in about \$100,000.

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